

**School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry**

**“My Decision: A Memoir”**

**and**

**“The Young Widow Memoir: Grief and the Rebuilding of  
Fractured Identity”**

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**This thesis is presented for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of  
Curtin University**

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## **Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

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# Abstract

This creative writing doctorate consists of two components: a creative work, namely a grief memoir, and the exegesis. Together they address the following questions: What are the narrative devices and strategies employed by contemporary women memoirists as a means of exploring fractured identity? How do the authors represent the experience of young widowhood and grief and how do they reconstruct their identity in the text?

The memoir narrates my husband's illness, recounting that he was locked into his body for a period of eight months, and his subsequent death. It portrays the fragmented and complex nature of recovery from grief, becoming a single mother and reconstructing my identity. Further, the text narrates an inner struggle of coming to terms with multiple injustices within the medical and legal institutions, such as misdiagnosis and a medical negligence trial, and the attempt to break free from these experiences without bitterness.

The exegesis undertakes a scholarly examination of the representation of grief and the reconstruction of narrative identity in six selected texts depicting young widowhood. It positions the theoretical approach underlying this investigation of autobiographical subjectivity at the intersection of autobiography scholarship and narrative psychology, specifically the Dialogical Self Theory. My conclusion is that the autobiographical act of positioning and repositioning multiple pre- and post-loss selves allows the authors to reconcile oppositional selves and to rebuild identity that has been fragmented by loss. As such, I am conceptualising autobiographical writing as a medium that is well-suited to the narrative rebuilding of identity following bereavement.

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## **My Decision: A Memoir**

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**The Young Widow Memoir:  
Grief and the Rebuilding of Fractured Identity**



## Introduction

Like most academics drawn to life writing or bereavement studies, I came to this field of research through personal experience, namely the death of my husband. I remember attending my first conference on autobiographical writing at Flinders University in Adelaide, which focused on the ethics of life writing, and feeling surprised at the number of academics who presented research that incorporated narrating their lived experiences, such as divorce, disability of their child and serious illness. I felt at home at the intersection of practice and scholarly research. My personal experience of young widowhood directed the spotlight of my scholarly focus to narratives of grief and I have been drawn to the creative writing doctorate with the intention to contribute knowledge to the grief memoir from the position of writer-as-researcher in two ways: to theorise the grief memoir through the lens of narrative identity construction and to document, reflect upon and theorise my practice, with a particular focus on the ethics of writing about my deceased husband.

The memoir boom has thrown the spotlight on this genre, and memoirists have had to defend their right to narrate and publish personal experience against the charge of navel-gazing raised by some critics. There has been significant scholarly investigation into the genre of memoir in recent times. By contrast, it is noteworthy that the sub-genre of the grief memoir has received little of that critical attention until now. This is especially remarkable in view of the fact that “memoirs about bereavement and loss are enjoying unprecedented popularity” (Brennan 2012, n.p.). Kathleen Fowler’s notion that the grief memoir, specifically women’s grief memoir, is a “relatively new literary form” (2007, 525), might explain why it has seen limited scholarly attention.

This exegesis examines the representation of a specific type of bereavement: young widowhood. To this end it investigates narrative identity construction in

the young widow memoir. In accord with Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, this exegesis frames narratives of grief as an emerging form of life writing. The authors have identified “Sixty Genres of Life Writing” in the second edition of their seminal text *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010, 253-286). Rather than naming ‘the grief memoir’ as a category, they included a section entitled ‘Narratives of Grief, Mourning and Reparation’ (2010, 138-141) that positions such narratives as an emergent form of life writing (2010, 128). As such, spousal bereavement memoirs can be seen as one type of narrative of grief, mourning and reparation.

By definition, young widow memoirs are concerned with loss. Losing a spouse at a young age is one of the most difficult experiences we may face in life. The literature on young widowhood reports that for young widows the death of their husband is an unexpected event that typically causes a fragmentation of the self and identity discontinuity (Haase and Johnston, 2012; Levinson, 1997; Van Den Hoonaard, 1997). It links this loss of identity to the fact that premature death violates the normal life cycle. This is explored in young widow memoirs, many of which make overt reference to the widow’s youth and comment on the rarity of young widowhood. The implications are that for young widows and for memoirists narrating premature spousal loss, widowhood is not merely a state of mourning but a process of adaptation that predominately entails the reconstruction of identity (Haase and Johnston, 2012; Levinson, 1997).

No academic analysis to date has specifically focused upon memoirs that depict young widowhood. I argue that these memoirs are especially interesting in the way that they raise questions about the narrative construction of selfhood. Thus, I see a particular need for critical analysis of the young widow memoir because age plays a key role in the experience of widowhood. The representation and negotiation of multiple pre- and post-loss subject positions and fragmented identity in the young widow memoir is unique, although it shares similarities with older widowhood memoirs. As such, I investigate the landscape of the contemporary young widow memoir and make the argument that it is an academic category in its own right. For

the purpose of this exegesis and in the context of Western memoirists, I define ‘young widows’ as being under fifty years of age at the time of their husbands’ death. In Western culture, the loss of one’s husband between the twenties and late-forties is considered premature, given the overall life expectancy of over 80 years. Unlike older widowhood, the premature death occasioning young widowhood goes against the expected life span; as such, it is a rare experience that puts younger women at odds with their contemporaries.<sup>1</sup>

My conceptual approach is located at the intersection of autobiography scholarship and narrative psychology; in particular, it draws upon the Dialogical Self Theory (DST). The exegesis investigates the narrative devices and strategies employed by women memoirists as a means of exploring fractured identity and experiences of loss and the autobiographical rebuilding of identity. As such, I have applied DST to my analysis of commercially published bereavement memoirs. This constitutes a new approach to memoir research, as I have not encountered the application of DST to a textual analysis of memoir in general, or young widowhood narratives in particular.

In investigating the autobiographical representation of grief and the narrative rebuilding of identity that has been fractured by loss, this exegesis argues that the autobiographical act of placing multiple pre- and post-loss subject positions in dialogue and conflict with each other and negotiating these configurations facilitates the narrative construction of identity and coherence. In agreement with DST, I argue that the process of positioning and repositioning identities facilitates the rebuilding of a relatively stable sense of self following identity discontinuity and allows the author to reclaim agency, which is lacking in the fragmented self. My argument starts off in Chapter 2 with a discussion and analysis of the representation of grief and fragmented

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<sup>1</sup> According to the US Census Bureau, 2010, young widowhood is rare, ranging from 0.1 % of all women in the age cohort at 20–24 years of age to 1.6 % at 40–44 years of age. This is in contrast to older widowhood, which has become a common life event, whereby over half of the married women aged 65 and older are widowed (Table 57: Marital Status of the population by Sex and Age). It is also interesting to note that widowhood is much more common for women than for men. According to the American Association of Retired Persons (2001) out of 13.6 million widows in the United States over 11 million were women (<http://www.widowshope.org/first-steps/these-are-the-statistics/>).

identity in the chosen memoirs and builds towards the examination of the rebuilding of a self that is relatively stable in Chapter 5.

This theoretical frame underpins the textual analysis of young widow memoirs that were commercially published in English after 2000. Drawing on my research into all of the published memoirs of this sub-genre, I have chosen six memoirs from this field for a close reading: Becky Aikman's *Saturday Night Widows* (2013), Kristen Breitweiser's *Wake-Up Call: The Political Education of a 9/11 Widow* (2006), Lucie Brownlee's *Life After You* (2015), Marian Fontana's *A Widow's Walk: A Memoir of 9/11* (2006), Artis Henderson's *Unremarried Widow* (2014), and Maggie MacKellar's *When it Rains* (2012). The analysis is also informed by additional memoirs from the field. For the purpose of this exegesis, I am focusing my research on single authored publications and exclude co-authored books. I have selected the six texts under review because the themes that they address are typical of this sub-genre, although the bereavements depicted arise from differing circumstances, such as suicide, military employment, cancer, as well as sudden and violent death.

The textual analysis will demonstrate that the memoirists utilise a wide range of narrative devices in the autobiographical process of rebuilding identity following young widowhood. It shows the narrative negotiation of the multiple positions arising out of widowhood to be multi-layered, complex and dynamic. I propose that memoir is a medium that is well suited to negotiating the loss of a loved one and to rebuilding fragmented identity. I now provide some background information about the six authors under review and a brief description of their memoirs. MacKellar's memoir *When it Rains* (2010) depicts her husband's unexpected and sudden descent into mental illness after ten years of marriage when she was 29, his suicide whilst she was pregnant with their second child and her own recovery from bereavement which included her move from the city to the country with her young children. The Australian author began writing about three years later after relocating to the country (Shields 2010). Prior to writing her memoir, MacKellar, a history lecturer, had published two books on the history of settlement in Australia

and Canada. I see a connection between her writing about female settlers on the frontier and her own move from Sydney to the country following the loss of her husband. She has written a sequel to her first memoir entitled *How to Get There* (2014) which is centred on her remarriage. MacKellar is now a full-time writer; she runs writers' retreats and is a speaker at writers' festivals.

British author Lucie Brownlee narrates the sudden death of her husband of six years during intercourse due to a rare heart condition when she was 36 in her memoir *Life After You* (2014), which depicts the first two years of her recovery from grief and coming to terms with being a single mother. She began writing a blog called *Wife after Death* one year after his death in 2013, which won a national award.<sup>2</sup> Her memoir was developed from the blog and is her first book. Brownlee studied creative writing and now holds a PhD in creative writing, which she began after her husband's death. She has written a novel as part of her doctorate.<sup>3</sup>

The remaining four authors are American. *Unremarried Widow* (2014) depicts Artis Henderson's experiences as military spouse: her low status as a girlfriend within military culture, her wedding just four months before her husband's deployment to Iraq, his death on active duty when she was 26, only two years after they met, and her journey of recovery from grief. The title *Unremarried Widow* is derived from military terminology. In choosing a title that denotes military jargon Henderson highlights the way in which military culture dominated both her marriage and her widowhood. Like MacKellar, Henderson became a professional writer after being widowed. Her memoir started as an essay in *The New York Times* (Burana 2014). She gained a Masters in journalism following her husband's death and went on to become a journalist and essayist.<sup>4</sup>

Becky Aikman was a journalist at *Newsday* and wrote for the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* prior to the publication of her memoir.<sup>5</sup> She narrates her recovery from grief after losing her husband of 20 years to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://luciebrownlee.com/wife-after-death/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://luciebrownlee.com/about/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://artishenderson.com>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.beckyaikman.com/bios/becky-aikman>

cancer when she was 49. Her professional skills as researcher and reporter colour the tone of *Saturday Night Widows* (2013). Aikman embarks on a quest to dispel what she sees as the myths about 'the five stages of grief' in general, and young widowhood in particular. Her narrative draws on interviews with leading bereavement scholars and clinicians in the style of investigative journalism. This approach lends substance to the portrayal of personal experience – her own and of the young widows in the group Aikman started, referred to by the title of her memoir.

Marian Fontana is a so-called 9/11 widow. Her memoir, *A Widow's Walk* (2005), narrates the loss of her husband, a firefighter in an elite squad, after seventeen years of marriage when she was 36, and her subsequent political activism, which threw her into the public limelight. She also portrays the difficulties adjusting to single parenthood. Fontana has a long career predating her memoir as playwright and performer and she has also written for *The New Yorker*, *The Guardian* and *Vanity Fair*.<sup>6</sup> Her memoir, which primarily recounts the first year of widowhood, is her first and only book.

Kristen Breitweiser is another 9/11 widow. Her memoir is a political manifesto that describes how she, together with three other widows, fought for the creation of the 9/11 Commission and provides a detailed account of Breitweiser's political activism and criticism of the US government. Her role as well-known activist is shown to be in stark contrast to her previous happy, quiet married life which she frames as life in a bubble that tuned out the outside world. Breitweiser was 30 at the time of the tragedy. She had been married for nearly five years and was the mother of a young daughter. Her memoir was published five years after her bereavement. Breitweiser is a lawyer and does not have a background in writing or journalism. She is the only memoirist under review who does not have her own website and who has not continued to write for publication.

Chapter 1 of this exegesis identifies my theoretical approach and argues for the category of the young widow memoir while mapping the landscape of this field.

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<sup>6</sup><http://marianfontana.com/bio/>

Chapter 2 analyses selected memoirs to examine the post-loss representation of identity in the texts, in particular the subject positions of wife and widow, and the narrative stance and representational strategies employed by the authors. Drawing on the DST concept of positioning, it shows that the memoirists represent their selfhood as fragmented and embodied.

Chapter 3 continues with the examination of pre- and post-loss identities in selected texts by investigating the representation of additional dominant identities such as single parent. It finds that these are portrayed in the texts as incompatible, conflictual selves that are placed in an oppositional relationship that shows the ongoing representation of identity as fragmented by loss.

Chapter 4 examines the portrayal of identities that are unique to 9/11 widowhood, such as the public nature of the loss, the issue of missing remains and the impetus to political activism. It demonstrates that the added label of '9/11 widow' is depicted as complicating the position of widow further.

Whereas the previous chapters examined the representation of pre- and post-loss identities, which were portrayed as fragmented and positioned as adversarial, Chapter 5 investigates the mediation of these oppositional selves. It draws on the DST concept of repositioning in its analysis of all six memoirs under review to show that the authors use narrative to negotiate their oppositional pre- and post-loss selves. It concludes that the memoirists rebuild identity and establish narrative coherence in the autobiographical act of reconciling adversarial selves.

In Chapter 6, I turn my gaze on the ethics of writing about my deceased husband by investigating my own creative practice through the lens of writer-as-researcher. I continue this investigation of my creative production in the Conclusion as I discuss the narrative stance and representational strategies used in my own creative production, with a particular focus on the way my memoir was informed by and informed the exegesis, and how I consciously constructed a complex ending that avoids framing a new relationship as

salvation. Lastly, it reviews how the young widow memoir and its media coverage contributes to our understanding of bereavement in a way the professional literature cannot.

Both the exegesis and my creative work explore narrative identity construction following young widowhood. In my memoir I have aimed to portray the complex nature of grief and of the rebuilding of fractured identity. The 'recovery arc' is the preferred narrative structure of commercially published memoirs. It frames recovery as a return to normalcy and has been criticised by autobiography scholars for failing to portray the complexity of loss (Prodromou, 2015; Robertson, 2012). It has not been my intention to write a counter-narrative to the recovery arc with my memoir, because it does indeed demonstrate personal transformation and narrative coherence, but rather *beyond* it. I wanted my creative work to complicate this dominant narrative arc by showing the complex and multi-layered nature of grief, and to demonstrate through narrating the fragmented texture of my own lived experience that adaptation to grief can encompass personal transformation, the rebuilding of identity as well as ongoing grief. As such, my memoir is intended to show the rebuilding of identity without the superficial simplicity of a happy ending with an identifiable end-point to grief. Conceptually, I replaced the term 'recovery', which implies a finite end-point, with adaptation to grief – a term used by contemporary bereavement theory (Sandler, Wolchik and Ayers 2007, 59), which denotes integrating the life experience of spousal loss into one's selfhood and life.



## Chapter 1: The Young Widow Memoir and Dialogical Self Theory

This chapter lays the groundwork for my exegetical investigation into narrative identity construction in the young widow memoir. I begin by providing a critical overview of the existing scholarship. Then I map the landscape of the contemporary field of the young widow memoir and categorise the single-authored memoirs published in English from 2000. Further, this chapter frames the theoretical approach underpinning my research, in particular the Dialogical Self Theory, which leads me to theorise the self. The unique combination of DST and autobiography scholarship allows me to argue for the possibility of rebuilding the self through the negotiation of multiple pre- and post-loss voices in autobiographical narrative. A second purpose of the chapter is to make a case for the young widow memoir as a category worthy of critical analysis.

In arguing that the young widow memoir is worthy of being conceptualised as an academic category in its own right, I am suggesting that young widowhood, which evokes feelings of having been cheated out of spending a lifetime together and often of raising children together, is a different experience to losing one's husband in old age. Widows of all ages narrate intimate loss, the intensity of grief, the shock at the absence of their husband, the sense of aloneness and the desire to share everyday experiences with their deceased husband. In addition, younger widows depict struggles that are related to their age. The single parent position is one such struggle – the shock of suddenly becoming a sole parent and juggling work commitments with parenting, is a dominant identity that is portrayed. The self that finds itself out of sync with her contemporaries is another common theme, whereby friends are shown to be unable to relate to the memoirist's experience of spousal bereavement. Other prominent subject positions that are represented frequently in the young widow memoir but are absent from most older widow memoirs such as Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical*

*Thinking* (2005) include yearning for new love, dating or entering a new relationship, and political activism.

Though there is only a small number of commercially published English language older widow memoirs, perhaps as few as half a dozen, they tend to have a much higher profile than the young widow memoir. This is presumably due to the fact that the memoirists were already well established authors and novelists, such as Didion and Joyce Carol Oates, who wrote *A Widow's Story* (2007). Didion and Oates narrate 40 and 47 years of marriage respectively.

In contrast, the young widow memoir is usually a debut memoir, though quite a number of authors were editors or journalists or had an affiliation with publishing. The memoirists tend to be well-educated, middle-class and white. All of the published memoirists were married to their deceased partner. For that reason, I am referring to the spouse generically as 'husband'. I am not excluding de facto or same-sex relationships, I simply did not find commercially published contemporary young widow memoirs by authors who would fall under those categories. It is also noteworthy that there are few published memoirs written by widowers.<sup>7</sup>

The only existing analysis of memoirs narrating young widowhood that I found was undertaken by Bernadette Brennan who examined two Australian memoirs, those of Maggie MacKellar and Virginia Lloyd. Interestingly, Brennan does not foreground the experience of widowhood but conceptualises the two texts as narrating the experience of grief in general. As such, she refers to 'memoirists of grief' (2012, n.p.) and does not employ the terminology of widow memoir or even grief memoir.

The existing scholarship surrounding women's grief memoirs is sparse compared to the extensive body of memoir scholarship (Birkerts, 2008; Couser, 2012; Gutkind, 2012; Rak, 2013). While the grief memoir has

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<sup>7</sup>See for example Matt Vickers' (2016) *Lecretia's Choice*, Text Publishing, Melbourne and John Evan's (2014) *Young Widower: A Memoir*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln. There are two memoirs written by older widowers: Mark Raphael Baker's (2017) *Thirty Days: A Journey to the End of Love*, Text Publishing, Melbourne and Jeffrey Berman's *Dying to Teach: A Memoir of Love, Loss and Learning* (2007), SUNY Press, New York. .

received limited scholarly attention, it has garnered “unprecedented popularity” from the public (Brennan 2012). Didion’s memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), significantly raised the profile of this genre and it is one of the best-known grief memoirs to date, as attested by the astounding number of reviews on Good Reads (with nearly 108000 ratings and over 8000 reviews).<sup>8</sup> It has also been the subject of scholarly inquiry (Berman, 2015; Bladek, 2014). Marta Bladek highlights the “critical and popular success” of Didion’s memoir and cites *New York Times* critic Janet Maslin as referring to the “lucrative loss-of-spouse market” triggered by Didion (2012, 936). In contrast to Maslin’s derisive appraisal, journalist Robert McCrum proposes that it was Didion’s contribution that raised the grief memoir “to the status of literature” (2016).

Amy-Katerini Prodromou’s *Navigating Loss in Women’s Contemporary Memoir* (2015) offers an in-depth theoretical analysis of a number of contemporary memoirs narrating loss, specifically “parent bereavement” (8) and life threatening illness, which Prodromou also conceptualises as loss. While *Navigating Loss* is a recent publication, the texts that Prodromou analyses were published between 1994 and 2003, and the field has changed significantly since then. There has been a sharp rise in the publication of grief memoirs in the last decade. In particular, 9/11 memoirs were published after 2003. Prodromou’s research lens is focused exclusively on one type of bereavement: the loss of a parent, but clearly other types of loss such as widowhood or the loss of one’s child require critical attention. Prodromou argues that, although feminist critical analysis of life writing by women has been on the rise in the last twenty years, “there is still a need to raise awareness of the important contribution women are making to the field” (2015, 33). In focusing my research on women memoirists, I intend to add knowledge to the body of work on women’s contribution to life writing, specifically to grief narratives.

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<sup>8</sup>[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/7815.The\\_Year\\_of\\_Magical\\_Thinking](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/7815.The_Year_of_Magical_Thinking), as of 10 April 2018. On 9 April 2018 alone there were 27 ratings. This is a significant number given that the memoir was published 13 years ago.

In *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (2006), Sandra Gilbert explores the topic of death and contemporary mourning by focusing her scholarly gaze on a variety of genres, including poems and photographs as well as memoirs. Thanatologist and literary analyst Fowler undertook an analysis of four grief memoirs in her article "'So new, So new': Art and Heart in Women's Grief Memoirs" (2007). Three of these memoirs were published in the 1990s and one contemporary co-authored young widow memoir from 2004. Fowler concludes that literary analysts have much "to explore in the rich harvest of women's grief memoirs" (2007, 527). Bladec's textual analysis of Didion's widow memoir (2014) theorises the role of space and place in the author's autobiographical depiction of grief.

Brennan's "Frameworks of grief: Narrative as an act of healing in contemporary memoir" (2012) sets out to defend the memoirist's right to write about personal loss against the charge of voyeurism. Brennan concludes that the two memoirists under review reconnect with their loved ones through the act of writing and "set them free" and that they "reach a point of equanimity" towards the end of their texts. Sandra Arnold's "Living in stories: creative non-fiction as an effective genre for writing about death and bereavement" (2009, n.p.) analyses parental memoirs of children's death and posits that the genre is "well suited to exploring the experience of death and bereavement". Like Brennan, Arnold argues that the grief memoir gives voice to and establishes continuing bonds with the deceased.

Five older widow memoirists have been subject to scholarly research in Jeffrey Berman's recent publication *Writing Widowhood: The Landscapes of Bereavement* (2015), including Didion and Oates.<sup>9</sup> One review pointedly suggests that Berman's book directs "much-needed attention to this segment of memoir writing".<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, none of the memoirs examined by Berman depict young widowhood, nor is there any mention by him that the experience of widowhood might vary at different ages. In terms of

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<sup>9</sup>Didion's memoir was also studied by Berman in his earlier book entitled *Companionship in Grief* (2010).

<sup>10</sup>Batcos, S. (2016). "Writing widowhood: the landscapes of bereavement". *Choice*, Vol.53 (11), 1612

terminology, neither Berman nor Bladek employ the designation 'widow memoir' and Berman refers to the 'grief memoir' only once (2015, 206). It seems, then, that there is a need for the widow memoir in general, and the young widow memoir in particular, to be identified as genres in their own right.

### **Mapping the landscape of the young widow memoir**

The field of the young widow memoir exploded following the tragic events of 9/11, which gave birth to a spate of young widow memoirs. Overall, according to my research about 15 to 20 young widow memoirs have been published commercially in English since 2000. The vast majority of these have been published in the US. Only three have been published in Australia, and two in the UK. Below I have categorised the memoirs in the field according to the cause of death of the deceased spouse. I have chosen this method because cause of death has strong implications for the experience of loss and the resultant task of rebuilding identity faced by the surviving widows. Christopher Davis et al. found that certain types of deaths such as sudden, untimely and violent death are more difficult to resolve (2000, 517-519).

The largest category is that of 9/11 memoirs, which comprise nearly half of all the contemporary young widow memoirs to date. These memoirs depict violent, sudden death. The term "9/11 widow" has been coined in the wake of the tragedy, and is used in these texts by the memoirists. Marian Fontana's *A Widow's Walk: A Memoir of 9/11* and Kristen Breitweiser's *Wake-Up Call: The Political Education of a 9/11 Widow* are deeply personal accounts of their grief and of their journey from ordinary life to the limelight as 9/11 political activists. By contrast, Abigail Carter's *The Alchemy of Loss: A Young Widow's Transformation* and Jennifer Gardner Trulson's *Where You Left Me* stay away from the political stage and portray their personal story of loss and grief. The latest 9/11 memoir was published in 2014: Kathy Trant's *Overcoming Loss and Embracing Hope*. However, the tone of this text has

the signature of a diary and as such differs significantly from the form of memoir exhibited in the other texts. There are another three co-authored memoirs that depict the experience of being a 9/11 widow.<sup>11</sup>

The second largest category of young widow memoirs depict loss due to illness, predominately cancer: *Saturday Night Widows* by Becky Aikman; *The Young Widow's Book of Home Improvement* by Virginia Lloyd; *Salvation Creek* by Susan Duncan; *What Remains: A Memoir of Fate, Friendship, and Love* by Carole Radziwill, and *The Iceberg* by Marion Coutts. This last memoir, though written by a young widow, ends with the death of Coutts' husband. As such, it bears testimony to her husband's long illness and portrays the author's inner landscape of witnessing her husband's slow process of dying rather than narrating widowhood. *Life After You* by Lucie Brownlee tells the story of the author losing her husband suddenly as a result of a rare heart condition. This is the only memoir in this sub-section that does not depict a loss by cancer.

Additionally, there are three more categories, each of which is represented by one published memoir: military death, suicide, and accident. Maggie MacKellar portrays the suicide of her husband in her memoir *When it Rains*. Catherine Tidd's *Confessions of a Mediocre Widow* narrates her husband's death in a motorcycle accident. It is striking and noteworthy that there is only one widow memoir that tells the story of a military death: Artis Henderson's *Unremarried Widow*. Henderson depicts herself as an outsider within military culture, and she chooses to leave the enclave of military life and the base following her husband's death, thus removing herself from military life as a widow. Given the number of fatalities during deployment in the US military - about 4500 in Iraq and another 2400 in Afghanistan, compared to the 3000 deaths that occurred in 9/11<sup>12</sup> - the discrepancy between a significant number of 9/11 widow memoirs and a single military widow memoir raises a

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<sup>11</sup>Carrington, Patricia, Julia Collins, Claudia Gerbasi, Ann Haynes, and Eve Charles. 2006. *Love You, Mean It: A True Story of Love, Loss, and Friendship*. New York: Hachette.  
Glick, Lyz, and Dan Zegart. 2004. *Your Father's Voice: Letters for Emmy about Life with Jeremy--and Without Him After 9/11*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.  
Kyle, Taya, and Jim DeFelice. 2015. *American Wife: A Memoir of Love, War, Faith, and Renewal*. New York: HarperCollins.

<sup>12</sup>See <http://icasualties.org/>; and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/14854816>

point of interest for future research: why do so few military widows write about their experiences in comparison to 9/11 widows?

The categorisation that I have undertaken above is not meant to suggest that the memoirists do not also narrate other complexities, but only that the nature of their husbands' death has instrumentally marked the grief experienced by the authors.

### **The theoretical approach underpinning this exegesis**

The theoretical approach underlying my examination of autobiographical subjectivity is at the intersection of autobiography scholarship and narrative psychology. Although autobiography scholarship and narrative psychology share a theoretical position which explore the role of narrative in identity formation, these two fields do not engage in interdisciplinary research in general. The focus of autobiography studies by definition is centred on autobiographical texts, whereas narrative psychologists are primarily concerned with clinical practice, and DST is applied in a broad context of clinical applications, including bereavement (Hermans and Gieser 2011b). However, DST is specifically conceptualised as a multidisciplinary approach.<sup>13</sup> I have not come across the application of DST to an analysis of memoirs.

Narrative psychology is useful to this exegetical analysis both in conceptual and methodological terms. Michael Crossley states that narrative psychology has been developed in relation to the psychology of trauma and an individual's response to distressing life experience. Although he foregrounds the theoretical assumption that identity construction is embedded in social, cultural and historical structures, he frames narrative psychology as "grounded in the attempt to understand" individual experience (2000, 40).

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<sup>13</sup>The 'International conference of the dialogical self' specifically aims for a multidisciplinary approach: 'The purpose of the conference is to create a forum for dialogue across the boundaries of specific (sub)disciplines that explores the possibilities and challenges related to the dialogical self (<http://www.dialogicalself2018.com/submissions.html>).

This approach is particularly useful for this exegesis, because while it subscribes to a concept of identity construction that acknowledges the central role played by social, cultural and historical structures, its scope focuses on individual experience. Further, the emphasis on individual distressing experience makes narrative psychology a fitting approach to an analysis of the autobiographical construction of identity following the lived experience of spousal loss.

Like autobiography scholarship, narrative psychology is also concerned with a concept of the multi-voiced self that is seen not as not fixed but as continually constructed (Hermans 2008). Key theorist in the field of narrative psychology Hubert Hermans developed DST, whereby the dialogical self is conceptualised as a “dynamic multiplicity of I-positions”: akin to interpersonal dialogue, these I-positions are involved in the dynamic process of dialogue, negotiation and exchange (Hermans and Gieser 2011a, 2). Central to DST is the notion of voice and “multivoicedness”, which conceptualises voice as “the tool by which the necessary relationship of communication is established” (Salgado and Hermans 2005, 11). The “I” is seen to have “the capacity to endow each position with a voice”, and the various voices that are in communication “behave like interacting characters in a story”. Each position narrates its experiences from its own perspective, which is contextual and depends upon its present situation in time and space (Hermans 2001, 332).

Salgado and Hermans view subjectivity as “a relational or dialogical production” because the “I” uses different voices to establish a relationship with one another (2005, 11). They see the self as emerging in reference to and mutual dependency of an Other: “Dialogically, to be an I is to relate with someone else” (2005, 10, emphasis in original). Further, communication is not just conceptualised to take place between others, but also with oneself in the form of thoughts and reflection. Consequently, “the self is brought to being by the communicational processes established with others and oneself” (Salgado and Hermans 2005, 11). The concept of the extended self, which is referred to as “the-other-in-the-self”, frames the other not as external



and “added” to the self, but rather as intrinsic to its nature and constitutive of the self (Hermans 2008, 186).

I am drawing on DST in my research because it provides a useful methodology for investigating autobiographical construction of identity. It offers a comprehensive theoretical framework and specific tools to analyse the positioning of selves. The performative act of positioning refers to how individuals organise, evaluate and narrate their life experiences within a moral framework (Raggatt 2011, 31). The methodology is based on several key concepts. Although DST sees the self as both temporal and spatial, according to Hermans “the notion of space is paramount in the dialogical self” and positions are conceptualised as “moving in space” and “described in highly dynamic ways” by the processes of “positioning” and “repositioning” (2001, 329). Central to the spatiality of positioning is the notion of “emplotment”, which is said to liberate “a narrative account from the pure time sequence. ... The constructive activity of emplotment allows for a juxtaposition of events, in which the original time sequence is changed in the service of finding new configurations” (Hermans 2001, 341). Agnieszka Konopka, Robert A. Neimeyer and Jason Jacobs-Lentz elaborate on the way the notion of spatiality is used metaphorically in DST: “The spatial metaphor invites one to think about processes that are happening in the self in a simultaneous rather than a sequential way. It suggests interconnections between aspects of the mindscape and allows them to be seen in a broader context” (2017, 2).

Another core feature of spatial positioning is that authors evaluate the events that they portray and juxtapose. Hermans explains that identifying positions does not show “which stories are told and which meanings are expressed from the perspective of” that particular voice (2001, 335). He emphasises that meaning is revealed by examining the valuation that the narrator assigns to positions, defining valuation as “the active processing of giving positive or negative value to the events in one’s life” (2001, 335). Positions are not viewed as stable centres of knowledge, but as perspectives that vary

according to time, place and context (Hermans 2008, 193). Importantly, the “I” cannot be separated from its temporal and spatial position. Further, positions are conceived as being subject to relations of power and dominance, whereby some positions are dominant and others repressed (Hermans 2008, 188). In addition, a position becomes a core position if it affects the functioning of a large number of other positions (Raggat 2011, 32).

Hermans argues for the capacity of the self to renew itself. He states that renewal takes place through the process of positioning and repositioning, which enables the dialogical self to respond to situations in new ways, thus making innovation possible (2008, 193). Innovation of the dialogical self is seen to be achieved in three ways. Firstly, a new position, either internal or external, can be introduced to existing positions, which leads to a reorganisation of the self. Secondly, because the dialogical self is subject to power relations, suppressed positions can move to the foreground and a dominant position can subside. Thirdly, two or more subject positions can develop co-operation. Such a coalition can also take place between previously oppositional voices (Hermans 2008, 194).

The dialogical self is conceived as being structured in narrative, both oral and written (Hermans and Gieser 2011a, 3) and the autobiographical narrator, who is framed as “an active processor of experience”, is seen to have agency (Hermans 2004, 177). In my research, I have not discovered any previous application of DST analysis to the bereavement memoirs I focus upon in this exegesis. Consistent with the notion of a multi-voiced and dialogical self, I conceptualise the self as dialogical, historical, localised, gendered, embodied, socialised and cultural (Hermans 2008).

Much has been written about the relationship between narrative and identity. Many eminent scholars—such as philosopher Paul Ricoeur, autobiography scholar Paul John Eakin, and narrative psychologists Dan McAdams and Hermans—posit that it is in narrative that identity is constructed. The two can be seen as being so closely interconnected that Ricoeur equates subjectivity with narrative identity (1991, 32) and Eakin uses the term identity

synonymously with narrative identity (2008, ix). This research aligns with a concept of narrative identity as espoused by Eakin and narrative psychology, which views the self as narratively constructed out of representing, juxtaposing and incorporating multiple selves.

One of the main debates around subjectivity and selfhood in critical and philosophical scholarship has centred on the question of a core self. The notion of selfhood that was dominant in modernity conceptualises the self as an essential entity that exists at the core of individuals, a true and real self that is immutable and that can be discovered (Hunt and Sampson 2006, 9-12). This view of the self was contested by post-structuralist thinkers who conceptualised the self as continually constructed through language and as being subjected to social, cultural and ideological forces (Weedon 1987, 21). However, some argue that the rejection by post-structuralism of the self as an innate entity has led to an uncompromising dismissal of the possibility that there might be “anything innate in the development of the self” or a “self at all” (Hunt and Sampson 2005, 12). Since the post-structural questioning of a stable self, there has been a turn away from this post-structural position by some autobiography scholars. Eakin, for example, has stated that “announcements of the death of the unified self are premature” (quoted in Ashley, Gilmore and Peters 1994, 212). He explains that:

such either/or polarities - identity as either fixed and stable or fragmented and fluid - strike me as inadequate to address the complexity of identity experience; they fail to capture how identity can change over time and yet in some way remain recognisably the same. (2015, 16)

Thus out of these two diametrically opposed positions another model has been conceptualised within narrative psychology theory, which integrates aspects of both concepts: the notion of a relatively stable - or unified - sense of self, and the post-structural theorising of the self as being constructed through performative living/writing. This synthesised model has been conceptualised in relation to rebuilding identity continuity following distressing life experiences. Similarly, Eakin explains that even though we are continually performing identity construction, without a catalyst that draws our

attention to our identity, we are so used to the process that it becomes transparent to our conscious awareness. As such, he says, it takes a “rupture” to bring our identity to our awareness and that this rupture serves as the catalyst that can prompt the narrator to attempt to rebuild identity continuity (2008, 7). Through the autobiographical process of positioning and repositioning identities, memoirists are able to reclaim agency and rebuild a relatively stable sense of self. Like Eakin, Hermans views the notions of identity stability and multiplicity as compatible rather than mutually exclusive. He frames relative stability in the self as the result of a developmental process of narrative positioning and repositioning of subject positions and not as fixed (2008, 188).

In opposition to Hermans and Eakin, Smith and Watson dismiss the concept of a unified sense of self. They see the self as being fluid, arguing that “identities are provisional. What may be a meaningful identity, on one day or in one context, may not be culturally and personally meaningful at another moment or in another context” (2010, 33). Drawing on Stuart Hall, Smith and Watson argue that identity is “a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process” (2010, 34). In contrast, while Hermans agrees with the notion that identities are constructed and vary within different contexts, he nevertheless sees the possibility of narratively mediating identities following fragmentation so that they are no longer contingent, reaching a level of narrative coherence that does not vary from moment to moment, but is relatively stable, though still subject to negotiation.

I am raising this discussion on the concept of a unified self specifically in relation to the rebuilding of identity following loss that takes place in the young widow memoir. In concurrence with Hermans and Eakin, I argue for the possibility of rebuilding the self through the negotiation of multiple pre- and post-loss voices in autobiographical narrative, viewing stability in the self as narrative coherence that is textually constructed out of the ongoing, complex dialogical relations between multiple, at times adversarial, subject positions (Hermans 2008, 189).

The process of constructing such a relatively stable sense of self out of the multiplicity of voices is not to be seen as a neat and tidy affair. I conceptualise narrative identity construction as a complex dialogical,

multilayered and ongoing developmental process. Eakin sums up the conundrum that arises out of the apparent incompatibility of unity and multiplicity by positioning it in relation to autobiographical narrative, noting that:

a psychological binary - an I-narrator in the present in dialogue with an I-character in the past - might be designed precisely to solve the conundrum of continuous identity: how we manage – if we do – to change over time and yet remain in some deep sense the same.  
(2014, 35)

It is the performative act of autobiographical writing which can construct a sense of unity in the dialogical self out of identity discontinuity. I would like to emphasise here that I am *not* suggesting that such writing inherently brings about coherence and identity continuity, only that it *can* do so. The next chapter begins the investigation into identity construction in the memoirs under review.

## Chapter 2: Representations of Fragmented Identity

This chapter examines the autobiographical process of representing pre- and post-loss identities, in particular the remembered position of the wife and the contested identity of widow. It explores the relationship of the identity of widow with the husband – the significant other – as being constitutive of her sense of selfhood and shows that the remembered other can form a subject position in the dialogical self, thus demonstrating the relational nature of identity construction beyond death. In addition, it investigates the relationship between post-loss identity and friends/contemporaries and how these others are also constitutive of identity construction. Further, I investigate how the memoirs engage with cultural metanarratives around widowhood. This chapter analyses Fontana's *A Widow's Walk*, Aikman's *Saturday Night Widows* and Brownlee's *Life After You*. The last section undertakes a reading of MacKellar's *When it Rains* and Henderson's *Remarried Widow* in addition to Brownlee's and Fontana's texts in order to conceptualise the dialogical self as embodied and to show that embodiment plays an important role in representing the position of widow.

In exploring autobiographical identity construction, I concur with Smith and Watson in conceptualising identities as synonymous with subject positions (2010, 32) and will use “identity” and “position” interchangeably in the exegesis. As stated in the previous chapter, Eakin proposes that ruptures within our everyday lives can bring our selfhood to conscious awareness (2008, 7). For the memoirists narrating spousal loss, autobiographical writing brings this awareness of identity discontinuity into sharp focus. The self that is destabilised by widowhood is narratively constructed as a fragmented self that is no longer recognisable to the authors as their pre-loss self. Marian Fontana shows herself to be acutely conscious of the loss of her old, pre-widowed self:

My creative mind has always fuelled me; now I find that it's left me. It's disappeared. I have spent the better part of my life writing plays and scripts, performing my own shows, and now I cannot even think about

writing. I do not even remember how it felt to care about those things (124).

Death has fragmented Fontana's self-knowledge; her pre-loss and post-loss identities are constructed as oppositional.

Like Fontana, Aikman is aware of her loss of self and also represents her post-loss experience as discontinuous. Her post-loss self is positioned in conflict with the remembered pre-loss "status quo" and is shown to be conscious of the process that has unfolded between her pre- and post-loss identities by representing her "whole persona" of independent woman to have been erased with the loss of her husband:

If Bernie could see the person I had become, he would say: "Who made off with my wife?" The one who thrived on meaningful work. The one who wouldn't hesitate to rethink her career, rethink her life, if it no longer satisfied. My whole persona as a no-bullshit, independent woman had gotten lost during those months of mourning. I had thought that my goal as widow was to get beyond grief and return to the status quo. But now the status quo was as gone as Bernie was. I would have to reinvent myself from scratch. (189)

To understand the last sentence of this quote, we can turn to the work of Prodromou, who analyses "memoirs of textured recovery" through the lens of Eakin and well-known illness and disability scholars such as Thomas Couser and Anne Hunsaker Hawkins. Prodromou points to the seeming contradiction that fragmentation of the self can actually create a catalyst for the memoirist to rebuild stability in the self: "paradoxically, in narratives of loss, where the self experiences a loss of stability, the impulse towards creating a stable self is actually more immediately apparent" (2015, 64). Aikman is referencing her former stable sense of self through the use of the phrase "my whole persona" and the denoting of her life as normal and happy, but what is particularly important here is her explicit desire - expressed in the notion of "reinventing herself from scratch" - to rebuild identity continuity. Life writing becomes the catalyst and the medium to address the loss of identity continuity. Experience

is made meaningful through reflexivity and interpretation. The autobiographical acts of reflection and interpretation play a central role in explaining the paradox foregrounded by Prodromou, because they make the loss of self known to the author and prompt the desire for rebuilding identity continuity.

### **The relational self: the fragmented identity of wife**

The memoirists under review show that their relationship with their husband – their significant other – is constitutive of their sense of selfhood. They construct the identity of wife in relation to the remembered other. Hermans foregrounds the central role the notion of “the other” plays in narrative identity construction. He conceptualises the other not as simply external to the self, but as “simultaneously part of the self and even constitutive of it” (2008, 186). Fontana’s representation of her husband is assigned such a central role in her own subjectivity that she reflects upon being dead herself, thus denoting her loss of agency and demonstrating that her husband is narratively constructed as constitutive of her identity: “I wonder how it would feel to die. ... Most of all, I imagine seeing Dave” (202). Fontana does not literally contemplate suicide but can be said to seek the obliteration of the pain caused by her husband’s death. According to Ruthellen Josselson, Amia Lieblich and Dan MacAdams, psychology has moved away from a purely agentic viewpoint that has primarily focused on the individuality, separateness and autonomy of the self and now recognises that “relationships are central ... to the constitution and expression of self” and new interpretations of identity construction conceptualise selves as “interrelated, interdependent and mutually constructive of one another”. The authors argue that narrative is particularly apt at expressing relational experience (2007, 3-5). In Fontana’s desire to have the pain of loss obliterated, the absence of a spouse is shown to be capable of catalysing a fragmentation of the self.



Like Fontana, Brownlee cannot imagine herself and her life without her husband and positions herself as dependent on her husband, portraying herself as being incapable of functioning on her own: “I can’t cope in a world without Mark” (105). She gives voice to the emptiness and loneliness that characterises her life as a widow: “My evenings had fallen into a woozy cycle of wine and late-night TV, interspersed with pangs of longing for my husband and my previous life” (198). Brownlee succinctly shows her awareness that she has become a different person, one she can neither recognise nor embrace: “I hated myself, this person that I’d become” (162). She not only expresses a loss of self, but also the loss of her whole life-style: “The place [the family home] ... came to feel like a museum of a previous life, full of artefacts that now only brought pain and gathered dust” (80). Drawing on the metaphors of museum and artefacts, Brownlee symbolises the loss of enjoyment and attachment to the family home, which, like a museum, is represented as a mere shadow of her former life and as no longer bearing relevance to her current life. She ends up selling her house and moving in with her mother, not due to financial necessity, but because of her overwhelming emotional emptiness and need to feel connected.

Eakin states that “*self* functions as shorthand for the complicated sense we have of our self-experience” (2015, 12, emphasis in original). Aikman frames her self-experience in relation to her husband. She portrays their relationship as intimately intertwined not only personally but also professionally and so constitutive of her sense of self that she signifies it as interdependent: “Before Bernie got sick, I had led one of those normal, happy lives straight out of Archie comics” (56). She describes her marriage as “symbiotic, a true collaboration, as we shared story ideas and edited each other’s writing. ... Our careers advanced, and our marriage followed the same fantasy script ... a fairy-tale romance” (2012, 57–58). Smith and Watson argue that authors of “relational narratives” understand their “self-formation” through significant others, whose stories are deeply imbedded into the story of the narrator (2010, 86). They view the role of significant others as central to and constitutive of identity formation, stating that “no ‘I’ speaks except as and through its others” (2010, 88). The central role the significant other - the

husband - played in identity construction is represented as a threat to selfhood by the memoirists in the context of his death. If the boundaries between the self and “the other” are so blurred that the question arises: “Is my spouse a part of me?” (Parkes and Prigerson 2010, 109), then the boundaries must become even more blurred after surviving a spouse. The deceased other remains alive in the act of remembering after the physical death. The memoirists under examination, in an act that is characteristic of the genre, make extensive reference to their deceased husband and construct their identity in relation to the remembered presence and now actual absence of their spouse. All of the memoirs include flashbacks and utilise the techniques of creative non-fiction such as dialogue, metaphor, and sensory, detailed and vivid description to narrate specific scenes that depict past shared experiences of the couples.

According to Hermans and Thorsten Gieser, the remembered other can form a subject position in the dialogical self (2011a, 17). The memoirists consciously and deliberately represent themselves as retaining the identity of wife, even after their loss. Brownlee describes her unwillingness to relinquish her identity as wife in the face of her husband’s death: “I was still in love with a dead man, and as far as I could tell that wasn’t going to change” (290). Aikman refers to herself as “a wife without a husband” (10). Hermans argues that the self is constructed out of different subject positions that each constitute different worldviews with their own desires and anxieties (2001, 332). The worldview of the identity of “wife” desperately desires a return to the old status quo, notwithstanding the impossibility of that wish. The position that remembers the happy past is wrought with confusion about the post-loss implications for that identity. Confusion arises about the felt identity of wife, which is at odds with the reality of widow. Brownlee links marital status and identity by drawing on inner monologue, asking herself stream-of-consciousness questions to contemplate the implications of this discrepancy:

Once my status had shifted to ‘widowed’, a raft of related queries began to emerge. Should I change my daughter’s surname to match mine? ... Were my in-laws still my in-laws, or does widowhood lore

state that they now be given another designation? In fact, was I actually still married? The vows said ‘till death do us part’, but hell, we didn’t mean it literally! And certainly not so soon! (88)

Brownlee draws on the narrative device of black humour to give voice to her confusion. Throughout her memoir she regularly utilises this mode. This could be partly the result of the fact that Brownlee’s memoir was written based on her blogposts about her experiences of young widowhood, and thus the tone of her memoir reflects the colloquial, casual language used in her blogs (<https://wifeafterdeath.com/>). Furthermore, Brownlee utilises black humour as a way of creating distance from the events she relates, and as such is a reproduction of the resisted identity of widow.

Eakin posits that narrative is deeply temporal (2015, 21). He frames memory as the “linchpin of autobiography’s core concern with identity,” and states that the orientation of memory is to the past, present and the future (2014, 24). The remembered identity of “wife” casts her relationship to the present as painful, and even happy memories of the past are depicted as distressing through the lens of the fragmented self that grieves the irretrievable past. In addition, the authors also portray the relationship with the future as altered by their grief. Brownlee represents her fear of a future without her husband: “The prospect of a future without Mark stretched out ahead of me and it scared me” (74). Fontana also signals that young widowhood causes a loss of the anticipated future, as it takes away the opportunity to grow old and raise children together. When she sees her dad kissing her mother on the cheek, she feels her heart stop: “That’s supposed to be me. I am supposed to be getting old with Dave, too” (117). In addition, Fontana, the mother of one son, depicts her devastation at the realisation that she will not have another child with her husband: “I have lost my chance at a second child, too. We had begun trying for a little girl” (187).

Remembered others can mediate the dialogical self in significant ways and for extended periods of time (Hermans and Gieser 2011a, 17). Brownlee draws on the unusual narrative strategy of capitalising all references to her husband in the third person as “Him,” thus elevating him to a God-like status.

This serves to emphasise to the reader - and to herself - the enormity of her loss, but also the ongoing and strongly-felt connection to her deceased husband. The act of capitalising, through which Brownlee constructs a felt if not lived identity of wife, can be seen as performative. Smith and Watson view life narrative as performative, defining autobiographical texts “as dynamic sites for the performance of identities that become constitutive of subjectivity” (214).

### **The fractured post-loss relationship with contemporaries and friends**

The difficulties of adjusting to the identity of young widow is narratively explored through the disconnect felt with friends. The identity that feels alienated from her social environment is one of many positions that is linked to and affected by the position of widow. As such, this exegesis frames the identity of widow as a core position. According to Peter Raggatt, “a position is a core position [in DST] when a large number of other positions is affected by its functioning” (2011, 32). The memoirists represent the fact that their young age puts them out of sync with their contemporaries as one of the main reasons underlying their resistance to the position of widow: “There I was, a year and a half after Bernie died, still out of place among my contemporaries, out of place among other widows, too” (Aikman, 152). Aikman denotes a fragmented self that no longer fits into her social environment: “I didn’t fit in .... I wasn’t like myself anymore, I wasn’t like my friends any more ... who was I now?” (10) and portrays herself as feeling alienated by the fact that others perceive her as a social enigma: “No one knew how to behave in the presence of a young widow” (64). The authors often resort to metaphor in trying to make sense of this. Aikman utilises the metaphor of heavy lifting to indicate that surviving premature loss carries with it social isolation and loneliness:

Among my mostly married contemporaries, I felt like a freak. ... we were out of sync. It wasn’t their fault that they were already overtaxed, with children, husbands, jobs. Did I mention husbands? ... At dinners

with couples I'd known for years, it was heavy lifting holding up half the conversation without Bernie to carry some of the load. (65)

It is not only the deceased spouse, then, the significant other, that is shown in the narratives to be constitutive of the memoirists' identity construction, but also the authors' friends and social environment. Smith and Watson argue that life writers "incorporate the voices of others within their archives of memory and reference", which includes projecting "another's subjectivity by imagining his or her interiority of thought and affect" (2010, 80). Aikman's portrayed alienation from her friends shows that these external positions contribute to her signified loss of identity.

Like Aikman, Brownlee represents young widowhood as a subject position that does not fit with her contemporaries: "Widowhood, especially 'young' widowhood, is very isolating. None of your contemporaries are going through it and none of them have the first clue about how to deal with it" (153). The memoirists show that as young widows they occupy a liminal space that others do not know how to navigate. In highlighting the rarity of young widowhood, the memoirists demonstrate their awareness of being part of a "minority group" and of being marked as different and "not fitting in". As such, they are being "Othered". Othering can be defined as "that process which serves to mark and name those thought to be different from oneself" (Weis quoted in Canales 2000, 18).

### **The fragmented self: cultural metanarratives of widowhood**

Smith and Watson argue that life writers construct their identities from metanarratives that are culturally available (2010, 34). John Stephens frames metanarratives as "a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (1998, 76). He points to the legitimising function of metanarratives that give meaning to social and gendered categories, such as "the widow". The socially constructed and gendered category of "widow" changes the memoirists' social status and

subjectivity. In the autobiographical act of representing the position of widow, the authors reject this identity. Smith and Watson state that “autobiographical subjects know themselves as subjects” who interpret and structure experiences through the lens of their social status and identities (2010, 25).<sup>14</sup> Narrative psychology concurs that positions are influenced by cultural and social forces as well as belief systems and ideologies which shape the voices that are available to the narrator (Crossley 2000, 31).

It is a typical feature of the young widow memoir that the authors cannot identify with the position of “widow”. This is evident in the many labels the authors ascribe to themselves in relation to the identity of widow. Aikman depicts herself as a “misfit widow” (5). Brownlee refers to herself as a “lonely widow” (150) and “wine-soused widow” (141). Like the other two memoirists, Fontana describes her bewilderment when she finds herself a widow and uses italics for emphasis: “‘I’m an angry widow.’ The word catches me off guard. I *am* a widow” (91, emphasis in original). According to Smith and Watson, memoirists “become readers of their experiential histories, bringing discursive schema that are culturally available to them to bear on what has happened” (2010, 27). Aikman draws on irony to ridicule culturally-available metanarratives of the young widow, such as the opposite images of the reclusive and the merry widow: “Some [friends] seemed to expect me to live out my life as Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows. Others promoted casual sex as if it were the new wonder drug from Merck. Should I jump a grief counsellor or take up knitting? Cat around or get a cat?” (64). The problem that the memoirists face is that they cannot identify with the culturally available structures of the concept “young widow”. Drawing on yet another metanarrative of the widow, “the Ingmar Bergman version”, Aikman explicitly resists the identity of widow and the cultural narrative schema: “Widow ... I could barely get the word out of my mouth ... widow. I didn’t seem to fit anyone’s definition of a proper widow, least of all my own—you know the Ingmar Bergman version, gloomy, pathetic, an all-around, ongoing downer” (4).

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<sup>14</sup> I would like to emphasise that the constructed category of “widow” is gendered. It is beyond the scope of this exegesis, however, to theorise the gendered nature of “widow” beyond this discussion on culture and metanarratives.

The notion of the gloomy, pathetic widow demonstrates the gendered nature of the social category of widow. Analysing the historical social construction of widowhood, Cornel Reinhart, Margaret Tacardon and Philip Hardy argue that the public continues to be attracted to the nineteenth-century idealised role model of widow embodied by Queen Victoria in her “long years of mourning”. They suggest that the image of Victoria “pulling her hair up, donning her widow’s cap with its train of black lace and white trim, all dressed in black” led to the Queen sanctioning “the moral authority of widowhood” in England and America alike, and while the “widow’s sacrifice” is perceived as “strange to our postmodern eye”, its legacy endures (1998, 28). Aikman also suggests that this morally-authoritative version of widowhood has had long-lasting effects, stating that it continues to inform many “of our culture’s most misguided notions” about widows. She sees Queen Victoria as having “set the standard for acceptable widow behaviour, living out the next 39 years of her life in partial seclusion, swathed head-to-toe in black” (70). Aikman identifies the conception that a widow’s grief is inevitably so overwhelming that it is difficult to return to a normal life as the “Queen Victoria syndrome”, (74) and refers to the “image of an old Italian lady in black in the back of the church” to denote socially constructed notions of widowhood (135). While representing and rejecting different widow-metanarratives in her memoir, for example the reclusive, gloomy, and merry widow, Aikman nevertheless positions herself as not being immune to constructing her identity according to metanarratives. Drawing on irony and italics, she ridicules her own perceptions:

I had to admit that my own conception wasn’t much more appealing – a sad sack of an old lady, marginal, helpless, irrelevant, ready for assisted living. *That can’t be me!* I protested. *The only assistance I want in living is from the personal shopper at Barneys!* ... Applying the word *widow* to *me* seemed...unseemly. Rude. I cast about for possible young-widow role models. ... I decided I should aspire to the impossible grace of Jackie Kennedy while trying to avoid the pitfalls of Jackie Onassis. (64)

## **Embodiment and the representation of grief**

The fragmentation and questioning discussed so far has an embodied character. The communication processes that take place in the dialogical self are both complex and embodied (Salgado and Hermans 2005, 11). In *Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death* (2006, 84) Laura Tanner comments that the role of embodiment in grief has been marginalised: “In leaving the embodied dimension of grief unspoken ... theories of mourning not only reflect but reinforce cultural assumptions that constitute the experience of loss as a strictly psychological phenomenon.” The strength of literary representations of grief, then, is their exploration of a subject that is embodied. Tanner argues that in contrast to literary representations of grief, “theoretical constructions of the mourning process ... focus almost exclusively on psychological definitions of recovery that assume a disembodied subject” (2006, 83).

Autobiography scholarship also focuses on the role of embodiment in experience. In a discussion on autobiographical writing in general, not specifically focused on grief, Smith foregrounds that the construction of subjectivity is very much anchored in the body. She succinctly sums up the broad and complex role of embodiment in the autobiographical performance of subjectivity by referring to “the body of the text, the body of the narrative, the body of the narrated I, the cultural body and the body politic” (1994, 276), thus opening up the concept of embodiment beyond the material body of the narrator to include the body of the text and cultural and political dimensions. I concur with Smith’s notion that subjectivity is anchored in the body and the “textual body of self-writing” (1994, 266).

The felt intensity of bereavement is evident in MacKellar’s memoir *When it Rains*. The voice of grief is metaphorically conveyed as embodied, personified and forceful:



My sorrow has arms and legs, fingers and toes. It has a mind and a heart: it bleeds and dies. It breathes and sobs, howls and laughs. ....I walk around in it. It is anger and rage.... It is vulnerable and needs to be held. It is impenetrable, an armour that cannot be pierced. (60)

Similarly, Henderson also employs metaphor to convey her felt pain. The voice of grief symbolically draws on the physicality of broken limbs to denote her vulnerability: "I had to steady myself the way a person steadies a broken arm, to keep from knocking into the hurt. And still, despite my best efforts, I often bumped against the pain" (156-157). Like MacKellar, Henderson's voice of grief symbolically draws on the image of bleeding to signify the extent of her felt sorrow: "The sadness that flowed like blood beneath my skin threatened to spill out" (158). Fontana also draws on the metaphor of bleeding, which is a pervasive symbol in the young widow memoir, used to express the embodied dimension of grief and the related symbol of woundedness: "I press tissues to my eyes, but it is like trying to stop the blood from a giant wound" (181). Thus, these passages highlight the embodiment of our experience in general, and the bodily connection in grief in particular. Smith and Watson posit that autobiographical writing links subjectivity, memory and the material body. They emphasise that autobiographical narrators are embodied subjects and that memory itself is embodied, thereby framing the body as the site of autobiographical knowledge. In their view the embodied nature of autobiographical writing can easily be forgotten – it "is easy to think" that autobiographical texts are separate from the material body (2010, 37). The physical metaphors that denote grief in the texts serve as a reminder of the embodiment of autobiographical knowledge.

Beyond the felt intensity of anguish, MacKellar fears that her grief has the power to erase her selfhood by defining her exclusively through that grief (31). This accords with contemporary bereavement theory, which identifies that the premature loss of a loved one generally leads to a shattering of the self (Neimeyer, 2001). MacKellar's identity of widow is represented as no longer recognising herself: "I feel so disconnected from who I used to be that

I wonder whether I'll ever be comfortable in myself again. This body is as foreign to me as this life I'm living without him" (68). Gieser stresses the role of the body within the dialogical self and demonstrates that positions can be embodied. Framing physicality as a lived body with emotions, feelings, sensations, and perceptions, he shows that embodied positions can enter into dialogue with other positions (2008, 41, 47, 49).

MacKellar represents her body as a post-loss position that is shown not only as foreign, but as having been physically changed by grief and missing her husband: "For who knew that his absence would physically change the shape of me? It's so obvious to me that my body announces his departure to the world. ... But it's more primal than that – quite simply, my body is different without him" (67-68). She links her subjectivity to her material body, thus showing in her literary representation that grief is not only psychological, but also embodied. MacKellar's voice of grief recognises that she is lost and sees the act of writing as the key to finding her path to recovery. Again, she draws on an anatomical metaphor to denote the process of deliberately taking back control: "I pin my tragedy onto the paper and with the precision of an anatomist take a scalpel to separate memory from bone. Perhaps if I can peel the layers of skin from its torso, it will stop having the power of a dark shape in the night" (31).

Brownlee utilises dialogue and metaphor to portray the shock she experienced in the face of her husband's sudden death, and in particular the nature of his death: he died of a heart attack aged 37 during love making, which means that her body was literally entwined with her husband's at the time of death: "'You've still got your socks on,'" He'd said, climbing on top of me ...Seconds later, He crashed on to the pillow next to me, heavy as a felled oak" (12). The image of the felled oak emphasises the weight of his lifeless body on top of hers. Employing metaphor again, Brownlee frames her shock as "the black fog of the aftermaths of sudden death" (74) and likens it to a "bomb blast" (81), thus denoting the physicality of her response and her sensory perception. She depicts the embodied nature of her grief in detail: "the array of physiological insults I was continuing to suffer grew steadily

more varied and impossible to predict. I'd had blurred vision, the retching, the insomnia, the random bouts of crying ... the panic attack was next" (102). Her loss of weight too evokes fear: "The weight loss had been so alarming in its speed and relentlessness I had even been to the doctor about it" (104). Finally, her grief provokes direct physical pain: "I miss him so much it hurts; it's actual, physical pain. I clutched my gut and retched on the side of the road" (121). Brownlee continues to describe her physical symptoms of grief: "After the blurring in the eyes and the panic attacks came a ringing in the ears ... a high-pitched soundtrack to my existence" (124). The screeching soundtrack underlines the embodied nature of her very existence. Like MacKellar, she links her embodiment to her subjectivity. Brownlee's detailed, specific and vivid account of the embodiment of her grief experience underscores Tanner's argument that literary representations of grief, unlike the psychological theorising of grief as a "disembodied subject", foreground an embodied subject.

Fontana employs capitalisation, multiple exclamation marks and dialogue to represent the intense and powerful nature of her grief and its impact on her subjectivity. She describes a scene in which she locks herself into her bathroom with her sister and young son on the other side:

'I WANT ....DAVE!!!!!!!!!! I WANT MY HUSBAND TO COME HOME!!!' I scream in an all-out tantrum, growling like a mad dog ... I want to rip my own skin off, pull the hair from my scalp.... 'WHY DID YOU GOOOOO! HOW COULD YOU LEAVE MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!' ... I don't care about anything. Nothing at all. I just stare at the stained grout, numb, my ears ringing. My heart clanking and thumping inside the cage of my ribs. I wonder how it would feel to die. I try to imagine this pain stopping, ceasing to exist, what it would feel like to have my heart fused back together like a video of a breaking glass on rewind. (201-202)

Like MacKellar, Henderson and Brownlee, Fontana represents her pain as embodied, causing strong physical reactions akin to physical injury. Her ears are ringing, she feels the urge to smash her head on the tile, portrays her

heart as broken to the point where she needs the embodied pain to stop through the obliteration of death.

As these textual samples show, the memoirists extensively draw on metaphors and symbolic language to represent the embodiment of grief. Metaphor plays a central role in the representation of embodied grief, making the literary representation of traumatic experience possible in a way literal language cannot. Louise DeSalvo acknowledges that “we must find a way to convey an experience that essentially seems beyond language and form” (1999, 159). She conceptualises metaphors as “important vehicles for conveying information that seems beyond the limits of language” (166), and explains that figurative language conveys a story and emotions in a way that prosaic language is not able to do (141). DeSalvo proposes that metaphor compacts meaning whilst evoking emotion, allowing the writer “to express nonliteral experiences in a highly individualised way” (166). Metaphor then serves as an important function in transforming experience into understanding. As Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson assert, “metaphor is not simply an aspect of figurative language, but a primary form of cognition, which enables us to make meaning through translating abstract bodily feelings into words” (2005, 21).

Prodromou makes an important contribution to the theorising of the grief memoir by dedicating one chapter of her book to “Embodied Experiences of Loss” (2015, 86-127). She brings the importance of the material body within the grieving process to the forefront of her discussion of loss in women’s memoirs. Prodromou views the mourner’s subjectivity in the face of loss as disembodied and argues that the process of recovery from grief is “the mourner’s movement back into the body facilitated by embodied memory” (87). I disagree with her conceptualisation of grief as a “performance of a disembodied self” (96) and the notion that “the embodied self suggests a recovered self” (87). In my view, we can only refer to *disembodiment* in relation to the actual loss of the body in death. This is particularly pertinent when memoirists narrate the loss of the disembodied other. Fontana’s vivid portrayal of her wailing and loss of control demonstrates her embodied

response to the impossibility of re-establishing intercorporeality with her deceased husband. In concurrence with Smith and Watson's assertion that all experience and representation thereof is embodied (2010, 38), I conceptualise the subjectivity of the bereaved – and of the author narrating grief – as inevitably embodied. I frame our humanness as one unit, integrating cognition, emotion and embodiment, and argue against the very notion of theorising grief in terms of “disembodiment”, suggesting that experience, which takes place through the material body and its senses, cannot be conceptualised as disembodied. These young-widow memoirists likewise show that their experience of grief is embodied, incorporating the senses, feelings and perceptions.

Whilst I agree that a psychological condition of detachment does exist, I suggest that it is a reaction performed by the body itself. I differentiate that we can never be “disembodied” while we are alive, thus asserting a literal interpretation of the term. This is not hair-splitting. I argue against the term “disembodiment” because it serves to obscure the important act of foregrounding the body in a narrative representation of identity construction following loss, minimising the significance embodiment plays in portraying the experience of grief and the construction of identity. I hold that it is detrimental to this discussion to view only the “recovered self” as embodied, and to denote embodiment as the hallmark of recovery and disembodiment as the marker for grief, in particular since Prodromou successfully makes the case for textured and nuanced recovery in autobiographical representation of loss, which shows recovery to be complex.

This chapter examined the autobiographical process of representing pre-and post-loss identities and the position of widow, which was foregrounded as embodied, was shown to be influenced by cultural metanarratives on widowhood. Further, the identity of widow was represented as a relational position that is constructed in dialogue with others, especially the husband as remembered other as well as the social environment. The next chapter continues the analysis of the representation of the fragmented identities of

wife and widow and goes on to investigate other fragmented positions that are shown to be linked to those core identities such as single mother.

## Chapter 3: Conflicting Identities Arising out of Loss

Beyond the struggle of the oppositional identities of wife and widow, young widow memoirs narrate additional incompatible, conflictual voices that arise out of the lived experience of widowhood. This chapter analyses MacKellar's *When it Rains* (2010) and Henderson's *Unremarried Widow* (2014) in order to examine the authors' dominant pre- and post-loss selves and to investigate how the texts place them in an adversarial relationship. In the second part of this chapter I draw on selected texts to look at the portrayal of the single parent, which is an identity of great significance in the young widow memoir. This chapter focuses on the representation of dominant identities that are shown to arise out of loss in these memoirs. These do not preclude further identities in the text, existing in dialogical relationship with these voices.

Henderson's narrative gives voice to two dominant, adversarial subject positions. Firstly she adopts the position of *military* partner/girlfriend and later wife. The meaning she ascribes to this position is represented through the pivotal voice of happiness through love, narrated in inner monologue:

How could I tell him that Miles [her husband] was what I had been looking for my entire life? That the great lonely space inside me, deep and wide as a canyon, shrank to nothing when Miles stepped into the room? That even in that shitty job in that god-awful town I still considered myself a lucky, lucky girl (68).

Secondly, Henderson reflectively positions herself as independent, politically active and with strong opinions on gender politics (10), as well as an aspiring writer. The voice that articulates these aspects of her identity is represented in conflict with the position of partner/wife. Henderson reflects on her concern about giving up her own dreams and aspects of herself, such as her career and desired place of residence, in order to play a supporting role in her

partner's life and military career: "how would I navigate this life for the long haul? Where would my own dreams and ambitions fit in?" (47)

The identity that dreams of studying to be a writer is positioned as being mutually exclusive with the identity that seeks fulfilment through love due to the nature of the military lifestyle that is characterised by frequent moving. When Miles is stationed in North Carolina after graduating from flight school, Henderson decides to leave sunny Florida in order to move in with him. When the car slips on icy roads on the way to the base, Henderson wonders how she is going to "weather Army life". She draws on the metaphor and symbolism of a cold front to portray her unease about the army:

My knuckles were rubbed raw in the chill and damp as we toted our combined life ....jugs of olive oil turned cloudy in the cold.... The rooms filled with a heavy animal smell when we ran the gas heater (44).

She describes her opposing emotions, the unease about her new life as military girlfriend and her deep love for Miles: "by all accounts our place was shoddy – but I loved it. I loved having a house of our own" (44).

The self that yearns to realise her dreams is riddled with uncertainty even on the eve of receiving Miles' marriage proposal. She looks at herself in the mirror: "I turned my face from side to side, trying to determine if I resembled the woman I had once been" (73). This voice is portrayed as troubled about being unable to recognise herself and is even shown to contemplate leaving Miles (72-73). This indicates the extent of the conflict between the voice that is deeply in love and the self that has to give up her old life, her independence as well as her own dreams, in order to live with Miles.

Henderson's representation of Miles shows that he has become an internalised position in her inner landscape in accord with the dialogical concept of the "other-in-the-self" (Hermans 2008, 186). Miles is portrayed as fulfilling Henderson's yearning for love. This causes her to place such significance and value on him that it represses and silences the position that



wishes to achieve her dreams. The suppression of the voice of self-fulfilment highlights that some positions dominate other positions, thereby overpowering them (Hermans 2008, 188).

Another influential other to Henderson is her mother. In a tragic repetition of fate Henderson's father died in a plane crash when she was five years of age, as did her husband later on. Her relationship with her mother is represented as complex and strained. Henderson recounts that she had always felt hurt that her mother erased her father from her life and angry at her mother's silence surrounding her father's death (172), unable to understand the motives for this silence: "Two years after the plane crash my mother performed an impossible feat: she made my father disappear" (71). The text mediates her anger towards her mother's erasing of her father's memory by showing that she loves her mother and seeks her guidance about her own uncertainty. Henderson uses direct dialogue to convey this. She reproduces a phone conversation: "I don't know what I'm doing here. I feel like I'm wasting my life ... I have a crappy job, we live in this shitty apartment. My car's on its last leg. I don't know what to do" (71). She asks her mother if she should leave. Her mother replies that she does not think that that would be the solution. She inquires if Henderson loves Miles. The dialogue is interspersed with reflection. The text depicts Henderson taking in and describing her surroundings: a shopping list with Miles' handwriting, pot holders by the stove and the calendar pinned to the wall. She reflects that "all those bits of domesticity formed the working fabric of our relationship and I realized that this was how people build a life together ... in the day-to-day. The dish soap, the spoon rest, the coupons" (72). Following this internal monologue, the text returns to the conversation with her mother. She loves him more than anything is Henderson's unwavering reply. "Then you stay" is the guidance she receives from her mother (72).

This interplay between the detailed description of events and the text stepping back from the experience in order to contemplate it shows the function of memoir in mediating experience by reflecting upon and making sense of it from the vantage of the present. Sven Birkerts argues that both

the “unprocessed feeling of the world” as it was experienced then “*and* a reflective vantage point” that contemplates the experience and realises that these events “made a different kind of sense over time” lie at the heart of memoir (2008, 23, emphasis in original). Following the death of her husband, Henderson’s post-loss grieving self is positioned as having lost love and happiness and, in her state of grief, the self that wants to actualise her dreams is numbed.

Whereas Henderson’s memoir narrates one dominant set of adversarial selves, MacKellar’s text is constituted around two dominant pairs of conflicting selves: firstly the working self that is in opposition to the voice of the grieving, fatigued single mother, and secondly the widowed self which is in conflict with the voice of the daughter who lost her mother to cancer.

The voice of the working self that likes her prestigious and stimulating job as history lecturer is positioned in the text in conflict with the grieving, overworked self that struggles to juggle single parenthood with her job and that yearns to retreat to the country for peace. The text represents MacKellar as being aware that her identity depends on the fulfilling and well-regarded position she holds at university and fearing that without it she will become solely defined by her role as mother, thereby lacking an independent identity.

As a result of this identity struggle, MacKellar is crippled by her insecurities, asking herself stream of consciousness questions in relation to her selfhood:

Who am I if I am not an historian, a lecturer at university? ...Who am I if I don’t have the reassurance of colleagues seeking my opinion on their work? Without the surety of my work, the blessed miracle of having a decent sum of money deposited in my bank account every week, will I become directionless, anonymous, invisible? (78-79)

MacKellar’s concept of self is shown to depend on her interactions with colleagues in her role as lecturer whose advice is sought by students and peers. This highlights the importance of external subject positions in the developmental process of narrative identity construction, whereby the self

can only be understood in its dynamic interplay between internal and external voices and the negotiation they engage in (Hermans 2008, 187).

MacKellar's steadfast reluctance to surrender her tenured position creates a conflict with the realities of her everyday life as single mother:

Despite the fact I was not coping with juggling my job, my kids and my loss, I fought against the obviousness of my need to escape. For if I left, I was relinquishing a hard-won position at the university. Instead of ambition, I was now swamped with a longing for silence, for a place where I wasn't forced outside myself, a place ...where I didn't have to gather my courage in case I met someone who'd see the brilliant light emanating from my wounds. (39)

The experience of loss is mediated in the text through the different perspectives narrated from the position of the history lecturer and the position of single mother. These different viewpoints show that subject positions are like interacting characters in a story, whereby each position narrates its experiences from its own perspective, located in time and space (Hermans and Gieser 2011a, 17).

The voice of the single mother narrates the emotional strain of bringing her children to day-care and school early in the morning: "I carry bags – a day-care bag, school bag, library bag, handbag and my laptop, whose hard edges bang against my leg" (38). Dropping off her young son at child care is heart-breaking: "I have to prise his octopus fingers from around my heart and shut my ears to his screams" (39). Using repetition by listing all the various bags and the metaphor of the octopus to show the clinginess and unhappiness of her son the subject position of overwhelmed single mother denotes strong physical and emotional strain.

The second set of dominant conflictual voices is based around the two different types of losses MacKellar has experienced: the subject position of angry, betrayed and lost widow is narratively placed in a conflicting dialogical relationship with the voice of the daughter who loses her mother to cancer

two years after her husband's suicide. The widowed self is unable to comprehend her husband's loss by suicide. This identity feels marked by her husband's death, because it perceives that he "died with intent" (5). Smith and Watson suggest that every narrative voice has its own tone and emphasis, rhythm, syntax and affect (2010, 79). Here, the tone of the voice of the widow is distinctly evident in the level of disconnection and alienation that is expressed towards her most significant other, her "closest companion of eleven years" (5). She cannot bear to name him in her memoir, referring to him throughout the narrative by the third person pronoun and the generic "my husband". The widowed self is plagued by unanswerable questions: "I struggle with questions, trying to wrestle them into something meaningful... no matter how often I chase them away, these questions circle back and size up my strength" (50). Some of her queries are expressed in the text as stream of consciousness questions: "How dare he leave me? How dare he lie to me?" (46). The text, then, represents MacKellar as resisting the position of widow in her refusal to name her husband in the memoir and, equally, as being aware of her defiance: "I fight every definition of widowhood his death throws at me.... He is the invisible adversary I shadow-box through the day" (149).

Though MacKellar rejects the identity of widow, the voice of the widow who has survived her husband and seeks redemption is nevertheless present in the text. It believes that recovery depends on understanding her husband's suicide. The tone this voice employs is that of anger: "if I resign, he'll have stolen my career as well as everything else" (78).

This is in stark contrast to Henderson, who represents her spouse as attentive to her and fulfilling her yearning for love. Although Henderson portrays her position of *military* spouse as being ostracised by military culture, she does not conceptualise Miles as having stolen her career and dreams and does not depict herself as resentful and angry. MacKellar wants to hold her husband responsible for what he did to his family (135). She feels a strong sense of betrayal, "deceived, manipulated and treated as less than nothing" (4) because her husband did not inform her of an earlier episode of

mental illness he experienced in his teens. At the same time, MacKellar's complex subject position of widow is shown to embody not only anger and betrayal, but also feelings of missing him. She is aware of the way her husband defined her, her identity and sense of self and even her physical body: "He lit me. Sent me high, beyond space, beyond time, he defined the edges of me" (45-46). The fact that her husband was such a significant other to MacKellar that he even influenced her physical self, "defining her edges", shows the extent to which he had become meaningful to her and, in accord with Henderson's representation, constitutive of her identity construction. The concept of the extended self positions the demarcation line between the self and the other as gradual rather than dualistic, suggesting a progressive transition between internal and external selves (Hermans 2008, 188).

MacKellar's accusatory, angry self wrestles with her voice of reason that logically lays out the realities of her husband's mental illness. In one of the versions she creates to explain his suicide, she paints him as the prince who wanted to protect his family from the ugliness of his illness. In another version, she perceives him as a coward. And lastly, she thinks that maybe something was wrong with her for failing to save him (51). Her active searching for meaning shows MacKellar's strong emotional dependence on finding answers. This quest for meaning making is in accord with contemporary bereavement theory, which posits that finding meaning is key to the reconstruction of a new self following loss (Neimeyer 2001, xii, 4). Bereavement scholar and psychologist Robert Neimeyer suggests that if death cannot be accounted for meaningfully, survivors undergo "the greatest discontinuity" (Neimeyer 2006, 236). Discontinuity is evident in MacKellar's emotional need for answers in relation to her husband's suicide. The not knowing plagues her: "What I want is some precise definition, something scientific that can be measured telling me who my husband had become and where the man I married went" (124).

The position of grieving daughter is represented as the exact opposite of the widowed self. This identity holds nothing back in her grief, which feels "pure and powerful" (124). MacKellar bemoans that her husband's mental illness

robbed her of her chance to mourn “him sweetly and cleanly” (136). The text assigns a pivotal role to her mother, now the remembered other, who is an important player in inner conversation and who constitutes meaning for her:

She remains the measuring stick in my head, the magnetic north against which I line up my emotions. I worry about the shortcuts I take, at the morally ambiguous decisions over which I know she would confront me.... I worry about how much less of a person I am without her. (98)

The experience of loss is differentiated and mediated in the text, which shows that experience to vary with the specific type of loss that is portrayed. MacKellar is confronted by the fact that her two losses feel utterly different and ponders why this is so, why a death by suicide feels so unlike a death from cancer, why they are almost like a “separate experience” (98).

MacKellar’s two distinctly different voices of loss are intertwined throughout the memoir and narratively placed in such close conflictual interdependent dialogical relationship that they become inseparable: “I can’t find my way into one moment without being ambushed by another” (99). The metaphor of ambush signifies the violent and uncertain nature of mourning a death by suicide. Her use of the language of violence – being ambushed, robbed – denotes her loss of agency, her perceived victimisation by her husband’s “choice” to die. MacKellar realises that the entanglement of her two losses stops her from resolving her emotions. The anger towards her husband gets displaced by missing her mother. She feels that this enmeshing of the different emotions she has in relation to her husband and her mother stops them from being resolved which keeps them trapped within her (99). Memoir mediates lived experience, in this case two different types of losses, by drawing on reflection. This is evident in the juxtaposing of vivid descriptions of MacKellar’s emotions that employ the language of violence with inner monologue that depicts her state of confusion.

The wind has got under my mind. It works away at my head and buzzes around until it finds something to prise loose. My thoughts flap

like a piece of corrugated iron on the roof. Not rhythmically but violently. ...I wonder how one death can cause me to lose faith and another death seems only to confirm that there has to be some sort of natural order to life, some all-controlling being, some God. (99)

## **The voice of the single parent**

As in MacKellar's book, many young widow memoirs portray single parenthood as a pivotal identity that contributes to the representation of identity discontinuity. The texts show the parent-child relationship altering with the death of the husband and father. In their grief, the authors portray themselves as being overwhelmed by parenting and by the responsibility of raising their child/ren on their own. The subject position of single mother is represented as struggling with the perceived need to fulfil two roles: mother *and* father. Fontana uses dialogue to portray herself as unable to accomplish that task. In response to her son's request to be picked up, she replies:

"I can't." I tell Aidan I'm feeling weary from the weekend. Aidan drops his head dramatically, moping next to me. "Daddy used to put me on his shoulders," he says pathetically. I can feel the strings around my heart tighten. ....I want to prove to Aidan that I am strong, that I can be both mother and father to him. Perhaps by completing this task, I can convince myself that this is true. (199)

Further, she draws on the embodied metaphor of having her chest weighed down by a rock to express the magnitude of the responsibility of raising her son on her own, thus symbolically signifying that it literally takes her breath away: "The weight of raising Aidan alone overtakes me, sits on my chest like a rock, making it difficult to breathe" (79).

Like Fontana, Brownlee also narrates having to fulfil the dual roles of mother and father, voicing a fear of not being able to accomplish this: "I had a stark reminder of my single-parent status, and it scared me. I now occupied two

roles, and I worried that I wasn't up to the task" (157). The fear of not being "up to the task" of fulfilling the roles of mother and father represented by Fontana and Brownlee shows the fragmented nature of the subject position of single mother.

Brownlee and Carter represent themselves as missing the support and advocacy of their husbands in fighting for their young daughters' well-being at school. When Brownlee's daughter is teased at school for her ginger hair, she "suddenly wanted Mark so that we could unite against those nasty boys from the Big School who'd teased our daughter" (156). When Carter's daughter experiences learning difficulties at school, Carter portrays the teacher as lacking understanding and empathy. She narrates her feelings of helplessness when faced with confronting the teacher on her own, without her husband:

I wished Arron was beside me, giving this woman a piece of his mind. ... he would have fiercely defended Olivia, as I should be doing ... I was frustrated and angry that I couldn't stand up for Olivia against this teacher. The loss of her father meant the loss of her best advocate, her strongest supporter, her fiercest ally. I felt I didn't have the strength to be any of these things for my daughter. (145)

As well as having to occupy the additional role of father, the memoirists represent a role reversal in their relationship with their children, whereby the children mother them, thus stepping into the role of parent. They show this shift in roles between adult and child to be evoked by the loss of control the mothers experience as a result of their grief. Brownlee describes how her daughter's demeanour changed almost overnight after her father's death, thus signifying her awareness of the reversal of roles that has taken place: "She had been a monstrous baby and toddler", but her father's death "signalled a new phase in her personality... at three years old B would initiate a kind of reversal of roles, she would be the one to soothe the tantrums and the tears... she had become the protector" (232).



Several strong emotions are given voice by the subject position of single mother, especially fear. Brownlee narrates fearing her own death: "I became convinced that I too was going to die and leave my child an orphan" (125). Brownlee is equally scared that her daughter could die suddenly, thus leaving her behind again: "We have slept together every night since Mark's death, lest she be taken from me as suddenly as He was" (92).

Utilising reflection and inner monologue, Carter signifies a potent mix of negative emotion, anger and guilt, which serves to make the subject position of single parent feel incapable and even bad: "I was now contending with anger that I didn't know how to control or explain. I was taking my frustrations out on the kids. Again. I felt I was the worst mother in the world, screaming at my kids, who had just lost their father. How could I be so cruel?" (139). Carter also shows herself to be overpowered with emotion when watching other dads: "Watching the dads play in the pool with their children was excruciating" (149). Observing fathers playing with their children reminds her of the extent of her children's loss, thus adding to the fragmentation of the voice of the single mother.

The analysis of the representation of dominant identities that arise out of young widowhood demonstrates that the texts position these identities in adversarial dialogical relationships. The memoirists draw on a range of narrative devices such as metaphor, inner monologue, reflection and dialogue to represent the self as fragmented and riddled with strong emotion such as fear, guilt and overwork. The pivotal identity of single mother is portrayed as having to occupy the roles of both mother and father, which is then represented as destabilising the self. Before turning to an analysis of how the texts mediate and negotiate these oppositional identities through the process of repositioning, the next chapter will continue to analyse the representation of fractured identities by looking at the unique positions that have arisen out of the context of 9/11 widowhood.

## Chapter 4: The Voice of the 9/11 Widow

As discussed in the introduction, 9/11 memoirs make up a substantial portion of the sub-genre of the young widow memoir. In this chapter, I will draw on three texts, Fontana's *A Widow's Walk: A Memoir of 9/11* (2005), Breitweiser's *Wake-Up Call: The Political Education of a 9/11 Widow* (2006) and Carter's *The Alchemy of Loss: A Young Widow's Transformation* (2008) to examine the portrayal of post-loss identities that are unique to 9/11. This chapter examines positions that are evoked by the specific circumstances of this large-scale tragedy, such as the public nature of the loss, missing body parts and political activism. If the identity of widow already proves to be as overwhelming as the previous chapters indicate, the added label of "9/11 widow" is depicted as complicating this position even more.

Introspection leads Fontana to contemplate how her private loss has been hijacked and put on show by the public nature of 9/11: "I wonder how our small, simple lives could turn into such a spectacle, how my sadness has become a show" (181). She bemoans the loss of privacy she has to endure: "What happened to our husbands ... has made privacy impossible. [They] have become a thick strand woven into history, and there is nothing we can do to extract their threads and keep them for our own" (114). Employing the metaphor of tapestry, she links her husband's death to history, thus denoting the magnitude of the historic event of 9/11. Utilising another metaphor, she reduces her personal loss to being a small piece in a huge mosaic, thus denoting that her bereavement is overshadowed by the loss to the whole country: "I realise for the first time that my personal loss is just one stone in the huge mosaic of what has happened to this country" (61). Fontana symbolically represents herself as an island in a vast sea of public mourners at the funeral, which shows her feelings of alienation: "The crowd stretches for blocks and blocks...I am lost on an island of grief. I can't look up when I hear the news cameras clicking, the hushed whispers, a million sets of eyes watching me" (173-174).

Like Fontana, Carter bemoans the way 9/11 funerals and memorial services are conducted publically: “Public services were for the masses – a one-size-fits-all solution” (192), thus signifying that there is no room for private and individualised mourning. Utilising inner monologue, she also portrays 9/11 widowhood as being different to widowhood in general: “Perhaps it was possible to see in my eyes that not only was I a widow, but I was a 9/11 widow. I felt I had to act a special way, be demure, or red-eyed, or wear a black band around my arm, or carry a folded flag” (27). She expresses the special responsibilities and added pressures that come with being a 9/11 widow, framing herself as a “representative of a 9/11 death” (44-45).

Breitweiser also positions herself as a 9/11 widow. In accord with Fontana and Carter, she represents the public nature of her husband’s death and his funeral as distressing:

This was to be the first set of looks I would get – the look of acknowledgement that I was one of those: a 9/11 widow. It was also the first time I realized that I was going to have to share my husband’s death with the rest of the world. I felt violated by the intrusion. I didn’t want to share it with anyone. I felt like it was mine and mine alone to keep. (47)

Breitweiser not only asserts the public nature of her loss, but also the unprecedented magnitude of 9/11, which she describes as even leaving therapists at a loss: “None of the therapists knew what to say to any of us. Nothing of this magnitude had ever happened in America before. We were on our own” (57). By employing the generic “we” she positions herself as a 9/11 survivor.

### **The voice of the widow: missing body parts**

The 9/11 memoirists represent the issue of missing remains and the ongoing process of body parts being recovered as distressing and portray it as adding to the fragmentation of the self. Breitweiser shows herself to be too

distressed to face dealing with her husband's recovered body parts. She describes not being able to bring herself for a whole year to inquire which of her husband's body parts had been found (62). When, over three years after 9/11, further remains are recovered, this only adds to the fragmentation of the self: "I really couldn't take it" (238).

Breitweiser narrates how the issue of recovered body parts becomes a topic of discussion amongst the widows, stating that a friend "received just part of a thigh; another, a torso and a foot" (74). She portrays the competition that arose between 9/11 widows in relation to recovered remains as bizarre and disturbing, describing some of the other widows as envious of her because she received her husband's wedding ring. By drawing on dialogue, she describes the surreal nature of a 9/11 death: "They told me how lucky I was to receive Ron's ring" (74).

Carter also describes the discussions of recovered remains amongst widows. In the style of creative non-fiction, she sets a scene, describing specific details such as eating lasagne, and utilises dialogue, in order to show the distressing issue of body parts:

As we stood eating our lasagne and salad from paper plates, our conversation centred on the question of remains. "Has your husband been recovered?" ... It was a carefully constructed question because rarely was a whole body found. You couldn't ask, "Was your husband's body found?" because you would then have to endure the response that in fact only his pinkie finger was. (72/73)

Fontana also uses scene setting to narrate the issue of body parts: "For the last few days I have sat in the firehouse kitchen, hearing whispered conversations about body parts and fingers and skin hanging on jagged steel like windless flags" (67). She states that "over two thirds of families have still received nothing" (320). Adding that "some families have had as many as two hundred body parts for a single victim", she uses inner monologue to denote how her life and identity have been altered by this surreal issue: "I was ... wondering how my life could turn so quickly from performing comedic

monologues to talking about body parts” (321). When she attends the first wake where there is no body in the casket, Fontana portrays herself as needing to receive her husband’s remains: “As the days pass, I find my goal shifting from Dave being found to hoping he will be found in one piece” (113).

### **Political activism**

Fontana’s memoir represents a dominant identity, which is a new post-loss position that arises in connection with 9/11 widowhood: political activist. A vast portion of her unusually long memoir (419 pages) is dedicated to narrating this political activism. In particular, she narrates scenes in vivid detail and uses dialogue to recall her public speeches and multiple conversations with various players that are related to her activism. These include politicians like Hilary Clinton and the Mayor of New York, journalists who chase her for an interview, the producer of the Oprah show, TV producers, CNN, the New York Times, fellow firefighter activists and countless 9/11 widows who look up to her for help in getting payments from the government.

Fontana represents the initial impetus behind her activism to be her outrage at the closure of her husband’s special operations squad just two weeks after 9/11: “‘They can’t do that!’ I yell, the lava rising higher” (83). She goes public with a flyer, entitled “A Widow’s Plea” which she includes verbatim in her book, in order to mobilise the public to fight against the closure of her husband’s firefighters’ unit (85). At the rally to save the firehouse, Fontana is asked if she wants to say anything:

“Why not,” I say, stepping up to the microphone, pulling Dave’s denim jacket tightly around me. My mouth feels like I’ve swallowed dirt. I jam my hands into my pockets to keep them from shaking, and I look out at the sea of people standing quietly. ... “Closing the Squad is a slap in the face not only to the men missing, but to their surviving brothers who have been searching for them.” I stop abruptly, my voice

cracking, and I squeeze my lips closed, trying not to cry... I can feel Dave around me, inside me, with me, and the tears come quiet and strong ... (92)

She shows herself to have been immediately thrown into the public limelight: "I am scheduled on Fox News, NY1, and CNN" (203) and is filmed for the documentary *Third Watch* (123). "My phone has been ringing off the hook with interview requests ... the press won't take no for an answer" (113). The position of 9/11 widow activist is represented to clash with the voice of the single mother:

I have spent little time with him [her son] in the last few weeks. Guilt opens up like a valve as I make my way to an empty room and try to call home on my cell phone... he needs me to be there but I'm trapped on Long Island with no way to get home. (215)

Fontana's second political goal is to raise awareness about the meagre income that firefighters, even in the elite squad, get paid in New York. In an interview for the *Oprah Show*, Fontana uses dialogue to articulate this goal: "People don't know how little money they [firefighters] make, that they have to work second jobs to keep up (186). Drawing on sarcasm, Fontana shows her contempt for the firefighters' low income: "Dave always said that he was worth more dead than alive, and the reality of this stings like winning the lottery on the day you've been diagnosed with an incurable disease" (204).

The voice of political activist is shown to fight for a third goal in addition to keeping her husband's firehouse open and raising awareness about the meagre income of firefighters: to keep the firefighters searching Ground Zero to recover remains. "The recent decision to cut back firefighters working on the site not only made it difficult to get information, but took away the comfort of knowing that my husband's remains would be treated with the dignity and respect he deserves" (263).

Fontana starts the Widows and Victim's Families Association, with the "immediate goal to protect the sanctity of the World Trade Centre and to

ensure the dignified recovery of our loved ones' remains" (264). She also fights for fair payments for 9/11 widows and other family members. This identity is shown to consume herself: "My head is so swollen with information, messages and things to do, I feel as if I will implode" (281). Employing stream of consciousness questions, Fontana represents herself as alienated by her activism: "I feel like I have entered some strange life that is not my own. What am I doing here? How did I go from being a wife and mom to an investigator?" (291). The post-loss identity of activist is positioned as surreal in contrast to her pre-loss identities of wife and mother.

Whereas Fontana portrays both her personal story of loss and her political activism in vivid detail, thus intertwining the two storylines, Breitweiser foregrounds the story of her political activism and her personal story of loss recedes into the background, almost as a backdrop to the activism that takes centre stage. Breitweiser positions herself as "intensely private" (19) and represents herself as feeling uncomfortable about depicting her emotions and sharing her personal story of loss: "It just wasn't me" (107). Her memoir *Wake-Up Call: The Political Education of a 9/11 Widow* (2006) depicts Breitweiser's political activism over a period of more than three years. It portrays how she and three other widows (a group that came to be known as the Jersey Girls) forced the US Government into holding an independent Commission into 9/11 and shows the enormous publicity their high-profile activism attracted.

Breitweiser's memoir can be characterised as a political manifesto. Smith discusses texts by women who "participate in self-consciously political autobiographical acts". She refers to such texts as "autobiographical manifestos" (1991, 189) and describes them as "purposeful, bold, contentious, the autobiographical manifesto contests the old inscriptions, the old histories, the old politics" (1991, 189). Breitweiser's tone is bold and contentious in her criticism of the Bush government, FBI, CIA and the airlines. Her political autobiographical manifesto shows her to be an outspoken activist with a clearly defined goal: to hold the government, the airlines and agencies accountable for what Breitweiser describes as their

incompetency. Accountability is the major theme of the memoir, and is used repeatedly throughout her book. Using direct speech, she depicts the ending to her Congressional testimony: “We need people to be held accountable for their failures. We need leaders with the courage to take responsibility for what went wrong” (117). By entitling Chapter Four “The fight for a 9/11 commission” and framing it as a battle with the White House, she draws on military language such as “tactic” (87) and “disarm” (88) to position it in terms of war.

Breitweiser represents her daughter’s future as the impetus for her political fight: “As her mother, I owe it to her to do everything I can do to provide her with a safe and happy future. A future full of war is not the future I have envisioned for my daughter” (213). Whereas Fontana juxtaposed her activist identity in opposition to the voice of the single parent, who showed herself as feeling guilty at investing so much energy into her activism that it left her too tired to function well as a parent, Breitweiser is able to reconcile the two identities of activist and mother on ideological grounds. She shows herself to have consciously chosen the post-loss subject position of political activist and being prepared to die in its cause. Using introspection, she asks herself: “If I got killed in a plane crash while supporting Kerry on the campaign trail, would it be worth it? I felt strongly that it would” (218). Her commitment to the cause, even if it would leave her young daughter orphaned, shows the degree to which Breitweiser identifies with this subject position, which she portrays as a dominant identity. This is in stark contrast to her pre-loss identity, which she represents as not caring about politics at all (22).

Drawing on sarcasm, she represents her growing activist identity as being fuelled by the unconstitutional and immoral motives of the government, and the fact that they are given “absolute immunity” (85): “Now that I am collateral damage, I no longer assume with blind faith that my government is doing everything it can to protect me” (85). She represents herself as having woken up to her blind faith and links this awakening to her “political education”: “We educated ourselves about the myriad issues linked to national security” (88). She denotes the importance of “political education” by making it the sub-title



of her memoir: *The political education of a 9/11 widow*. Breitweiser represents her realisation that for the White House “support” and “subvert” were almost synonymous as the “dawn of her political awakening” (126). This political awakening is portrayed as evoking an important shift in identity. Breitweiser represents herself and her new widow friends as survivors, which she positions explicitly in contrast to being a victim: “We understood that there was a difference between being victims and survivors. Our husbands had become senseless victims. We were going to be survivors. ... We were not going to rest until we knew that something like 9/11 would never happen again” (67).

All three memoirists discuss the Victim Compensation Fund (VCF), employing detail and specific description in the style of creative non-fiction to show how much the issue of this Fund impacts upon them and their identity. Although Carter does not represent herself as political activist in the text like Breitweiser, she nevertheless positions herself as critical of the government and a whole range of systems, thus making clear political statements: “On some level every system to prevent such a catastrophic attack had failed: the airlines, the American government, the military, the building, George Bush” (159).

Like the other two memoirists, Carter also describes the unfair nature of the VCF. In accord with Breitweiser, she represents her concern with accountability and draws on inner monologue to portray her fear of signing the “Waiver of Rights”:

Flaws in airport security procedures had allowed fifteen terrorists to board planes with box cutters. The door to the roof of the World Trade Center was locked ...by signing the waiver, I might be preventing advances in building design that would protect against future catastrophic failures. I might be allowing airlines to continue operating with slapdash security. (165)

The political voice that wants accountability and necessary change in security measures is positioned in conflict with the single mother identity who needs

to ensure the financial security of her young family: “If I refused to sign, my only other option would be to sue, an uncertain, time-consuming, and costly venture. ... I took a deep breath and signed” (165). Like Fontana, Carter places the political and mother identities in a conflictual dialogical relationship.

Both Breitweiser and Carter use the metaphor of blood money to denote the immoral and unfair nature of the VCF. Carter states: “I felt as though I was signing in blood” (165) and Breitweiser uses sarcasm to extend the metaphor, labelling it as discounted blood money: “The government created the VCF to ‘pay off’ those victims with what some would call blood money – in some cases discounted blood money” (78).

Breitweiser positions her political activism as providing a respite from grief: a “healthy distraction from the sadness of our new lives” (88) and an “enormous distraction” (236). Drawing on an animalistic metaphor, she represents the busyness associated with her activism as frenetic: “We kept ourselves busy, like gerbils running wildly on a spinning wheel. We were frenetic” (88). Breitweiser uses “we” throughout the book in relation to the Jersey Girls, a name that became akin to branding a product, thus morphing the four widows generically into one unit, rather than referring to herself as “I”. This has the effect of making her rhetoric less personal. Smith suggests that it is a characteristic of the autobiographical manifesto by women that the narrator “assumes a collective orientation”, stating that “during her public performance the manifesto speaker positions herself expressly as a member of a group or community” (1991, 193). This is the case for both Breitweiser and Fontana. Breitweiser positions herself as one of the “Jersey Girls”, and as a representative of 9/11 victims more generally. Fontana also represents herself as an advocate for 9/11 bereaved family members, and as a representative of the firefighters who fight for their rights.

Like Fontana, Breitweiser employs dialogue to represent her political activism. She portrays her Congressional testimony in detail, which she gave one year after 9/11, showing it to be at the core of her political activism: “As I entered the hearing room, cameras began clicking and flashbulbs snapping.

It was mortifying. Once I was seated, the photographers crouched down in front of me, still clicking away furiously. It was loud and distracting” (108). Excerpts from her speech are conveyed over several pages in the memoir (108-118).

Breitweiser’s autobiographical manifesto outlines her political activism as a member of the Jersey Girls, giving an account of her testimony and factual evidence. In particular it portrays the group’s fight against the White House, which opposed the independent commission despite the senate voting 90-8 in its favour. The voice of the political activist is shown to take pride in achieving political results. Breitweiser successfully fights to force Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, to testify under oath for the commission. She represents this as a moment of victory, thus showing the central role her identity as political activist embodies: “Watching her raise her hand and swear to tell the truth ... was one of the most satisfying moments of the entire four-year gruelling process” (162). Breitweiser emphasises the role she and the other widows played in making this happen: “We had forced her to be in a place she did not want to be in: in the seat of accountability” (162).

Although Breitweiser positioned herself for most of her activism as non-partisan, she frames her decision to support the democrats after three and half years of fighting the Bush administration as a matter of “life and death” (217). In the context of having lost her husband in 9/11, this is not lip service, but a powerful statement of the importance of the identity of activist. Breitweiser shows herself to be fully committed to her political activism, not shying away from hardship. Although she cancelled a holiday with her daughter because she never wanted to fly again, she portrays herself to be willing to fly when campaigning for the Democrat John Kerry (217). Taking the position of activist is portrayed as claiming agency. Before her husband’s death Breitweiser voted according to his beliefs, and he was a staunch Republican. But now the text represents her as having shifted her views after forming her own opinion based on her experiences as activist (224).

Breitweiser employs repetition and the language of conflict and war to emphasise her political activism and to represent her political identity following her husband's loss:

Ever since the first few months after Ron's death, I'd been fighting for something: fighting to make the Victim's Compensation Fund more equitable, fighting for the independent commission, fighting for access, fighting for public hearings. Then there were the times I testified and the enormous preparation that went into those presentations (236).

Thus, political activism is portrayed as an active identity that is easier to bear than passive grief. Breitweiser employs creative non-fiction techniques such as extensive dialogue, scene setting and inner monologue, but she frequently uses summary narrative or "telling", which moves the text forward and offers the reader a lot of facts and her tone is predominantly non-emotional. In contrast to Breitweiser's straightforward and factual style of writing, which keeps the portrayal of her grief to a minimum, Fontana's tone is highly emotional. She crafts her text skilfully, utilising a wide range of creative non-fiction devices, in particular scene setting, dialogue and metaphor. What is unique about Fontana's text, however, is that her narrative rhythm barely changes. She employs scenes or "showing" throughout her entire memoir, thus slowing down the pace to a point where the detail becomes overwhelming to the reader due to a lack of interspersing showing with telling to alter the rhythm and move the pace forward. Breitweiser and Fontana employ a tone and rhythm that are opposite to each other, yet both are powerful autobiographical manifestos. A manifesto is defined as a "proof, a piece of evidence, a public declaration or proclamation ... for the purpose of making known past actions, and explaining the reasons or motives for actions" (OED, cited in Smith, 1991, 189). Breitweiser and Fontana represent their proof and evidence and make a public declaration with the intention of explaining their reasons and motives.

The narrating of 9/11 widowhood has resulted in unique identities, including the public nature of the loss, the distressing issue of missing body parts and in particular the dominant identity of political activist. While Breitweiser's

memoir is predominantly an autobiographical political manifesto, Fontana's memoir intertwines two storylines: the personal story of loss and the political activism for the rights of firefighters and relatives of 9/11 victims. Arthur Frank suggests that the autobiographical manifesto often carries demands for social action and is characterised by narrators who "want to use suffering to move others forward with them" (2013, 120). Fontana and Breitweiser both signify their personal suffering as the driver behind their call for social action and political change, so that others may be protected from such suffering in the future.

## Chapter 5: Repositioning and Negotiating Identities

The previous chapters analysed the way young widow memoirists represent their identity discontinuity following loss and how they place various post-loss identities in an oppositional relationship. The authors express their need to rebuild their sense of self, for example, in Aikman's notion of having to "reinvent herself from scratch" (189). Drawing on the DST concept of repositioning, this chapter examines how the memoirists use narrative to negotiate and mediate the multiple internal and external subject positions that have arisen out of loss, such as widow and political activist, in order to reconcile adversarial selves, to reclaim agency and to rebuild identity.

Hermans (2008) argues for the capacity of the dialogical self to renew itself through the process of repositioning and innovation, whereby the rebuilding of identity continuity is seen as the result of a dynamic process of dialogical interchange that allows for the possibility of new perspectives, insights and contexts to emerge in the text, thus leading to the re-evaluation, reconstruction and reconciling of existing positions. Positioning and repositioning is the discursive and reflexive practice of constructing a sense of self in narrative, which allows the dialogical self to mediate the experience of loss in response to altered perspectives (192-194). The dynamic nature of dialogical negotiation is evident in Henderson's memoir. She narrates that after her husband's death, she received a love letter from him that he had written to her in the event of his death, which functions as the impulse for identity reconstruction. It ends:

Live your life on earth to the max. You have so many options with what to do with your life. Pursue your dreams wisely, with all your heart, with honour and with decency. I will love you forever, look on you always, and see you soon. I love you. (135)

Inspired by Miles' encouragement, Henderson's post-loss self is portrayed as daring to go after her dream of becoming a writer. The new voice of self-actualisation reflects:

[who would have thought] that Miles would be the catalyst for this blossoming life, that my time with him would lay the foundation for some braver, more fearless me. That through knowing him and loving him, I would become someone with the wherewithal to seize my dreams. (219)

As such, the formerly adversarial selves are repositioned into a reconciliatory relationship in the post-loss context of Miles' letter urging Henderson to realise her dreams. This shows an internalisation of her external significant other beyond his death in accord with the "other-in-the-self" concept (Hermans 2008, 186) where Miles plays a pivotal role in inner conversation and is constitutive of meaning making in the text.

Henderson's textual reconstruction of her identity through the process of repositioning and thus reclaiming agency, shows that a subject position is not fixed but dependent on the context, which can include the voice of a significant other, in this case a deceased other who is represented in the text not as a remembered other but as an actual voiced position in the form of a letter. Whereas previously her husband's voice was constructed as a hindrance to actualisation, it is now re-constructed as a catalyst for making her dreams come true, thus contributing to the rebuilding of her fragmented self. Subject positions are not stable centres of knowledge then, but perspectives that are constructed depending on the context. They are neither inherently good nor bad, but are narratively constructed as such in particular situations and this construction can change if the context is altered. As such, the dialogical self exists in both time and space through the process of positioning (Raggat 2011, 29). Henderson's subject position of unfulfilled self-actualisation is now reconstructed in the text into fulfilled actualisation.

Hermans argues that the narrative process of positioning and repositioning identities is central to the autobiographical [re]construction of identity, and he foregrounds the spatial nature of this process. "An I-position is neither a static

entity nor a concept about one's self. It is, rather, a dynamic and embodied process of positioning that has a spatial character. One takes a position toward some-body/something or toward an emotion, which is often related with an embodied movement in real or mental space (e.g., approaching or distancing, expanding or constricting)" (Konopka et al, 2017, 5). An essential feature of spatial positioning is the evaluation by the narrator of the events that are portrayed and juxtaposed (Hermans 2001, 341). Henderson's initial positioning of the identity that seeks self-actualisation was evaluated as being incompatible with the self that seeks love, which was assigned a dominating position. With the introduction of Miles' letter, the same position was reinterpreted as being possible in light of his encouragement. As such, the repositioning of Miles' position from hindrance to catalyst is based on a change in perspective, context - his death - and interpretation.

Similarly, MacKellar's adversarial selves of successful academic and single mother who seeks peace for her family in the country are reconciled in her text. The self that seeks peace reinterprets and repositions life in the country as meaningful and not exclusive of her intellectual pursuits. MacKellar frames country life as a nurturing environment for her daughter to work through her grief: "Living away from the city has given her room to let her grief roll out" (151) and she personifies the land to represent it as healing: "It's as if I brought one child up to this world and the land has handed me back an infinitely stronger one" (152). MacKellar's tone and rhythm change as she narrates scenes from her and her children's new life in the country. Her tone is calm and tender, in stark contrast to her earlier voice which was emotionally intense in representing her grief, and the rhythm of her text slows down as she narrates scenes of the children interacting with animals on the farm. Using introspection, she makes herself consciously aware of the positive influence of farm life:

Life out here is giving them new stories. The calves become just one of their memories. My children will know what it feels like to be licked all over by the sandpaper tongue of a calf .... They're learning how to move softly, how to shift an animal much bigger than themselves by



their body language. They carry the responsibility of a hungry animal depending on them to be fed. (153-154)

MacKellar's identity of intellectual is repositioned in the text when a new context is introduced: whilst living in the country, MacKellar is offered a job of writing a historical book. This opportunity alters the perspective of that voice, which now recognises that scholarly satisfaction is possible outside her job as university lecturer (55, 79, 119). Intellectual fulfilment as well as enjoyment of financial reward experienced by this position as a result of writing this book is shown to provide a new context, thereby allowing the intellectual self to co-exist with the voice of the single mother in a reconciliatory relationship: "The money would be enough to live up here [in the country] for a year or so, and the promise of a publication instantly diminishes my insecurities of leaving my job" (79). The process of autobiographical repositioning, which introduced a new context to the intellectual self and changed the perspective of that voice, performed a reconciliation between the formerly opposed voices of single parent and academic.

MacKellar's position which made recovery dependent upon understanding her husband's suicide, thereby preventing her from finding peace, seeks solace in a variety of texts, including Janet Frame and classical texts such as Euripides' *Heracles* (30, 128), and is drawn to the art form of tragedy (30). One of the most influential texts for MacKellar is that by the ancient Greek poet Sappho. Inspiring figures in literature can serve as a catalyst for helping to create order in confused or oppositional subject positions (Hermans and Gieser 2011a, 17). The insights gained from these books and their protagonists can be seen as new positions being introduced to an existing position, which leads to a reorganisation of the self. MacKellar's voice that seeks understanding reaches a conclusion upon reflecting on the art form of tragedy: that no matter how deep she dives under the sea she will never really understand why her husband committed suicide. This is a step towards integration of the inconsolable self that feels inner peace is out of reach unless she comprehends and the position of recovery. In accord with Sappho's words, this self finds herself wanting again, both life and love (145).

The self that seeks understanding is further repositioned by being juxtaposed with a memory from the past early on in MacKellar's marriage, namely a trip to Alaska, a pivotal time in her life which she repeatedly recalls throughout the narrative. "Though I am afraid of the ocean, I have to accept its overwhelming presence if I am to sleep" (218).

According to DST the performative act of juxtaposing events means that new configurations are made that alter the original time sequence. DST states that the dialogical relations that underpin the dialogical self are constructed out of both interpersonal and intrapersonal dialogue between internal, internalised and external positions. This construction "makes it possible to contract temporally diverse events into spatial oppositions that are simultaneously present" in the inner landscape, thus framing "temporally distributed thoughts and experiences" as "a polyphony of spatial oppositions" (Hermans and Gieser 2011a, 6-7). The effect of juxtaposing is compared "to bringing two photos that are made of the same person at two very different moments in time. The juxtaposition of the pictures causes a shock that can result only if temporal differences are transformed into spatial opposition" (Hermans 2001, 341). The scene which juxtaposes memories from the Alaska trip with MacKellar's self that desperately seeks understanding can be seen as such a merging of two snapshots, namely of MacKellar's younger self and her widowed self. This positioning denotes a change in attitude of that post-loss identity, which now recognises that sometimes in life you have to accept things the way they are.

I suggest that the voice of seeking understanding is integrated rather than reconciled through the process of negotiation in the text. I see reconciliation as evoking a change in perspective in a position, for example as shown above with MacKellar's identity of intellectual. By contrast, integration does not enact the same level of change in perspective of a voice. The position that seeks to comprehend her husband's suicide is portrayed as accepting that this is not possible and no longer resists recovery, thus making rebuilding identity continuity possible. However, the position itself only accepts this state of unknowing, its perspective has not changed in that it

would still prefer to understand her husband's suicide. The various repositionings of MacKellar's self that seeks comprehension with a range of classical and contemporary texts as well as her earlier trip to Alaska is the enactment of "a polyphony of spatial oppositions" of temporarily different experiences (Hermans and Gieser 2011a, 7).

As far as MacKellar's position of the grieving daughter is concerned, the repositioning of this voice with a connection to place reconstructs this identity. MacKellar narrates the move with her young children to the farm where her mother grew up, thereby creating the ongoing connection to her mother she craves for herself and her children:

It's a rare sort of continuity: my children walk along the same track she used: they catch the bus along the same road on which she rode her pony to school; they sit in the same space she sat in to learn to read and write. It feels safe to be part of this continuity. (116)

Her children are engrossed in the stories she repeats that her mother used to tell her as a child. MacKellar is able to establish "continuing bonds" in the text with her mother by writing about her and reflecting upon her mother's ongoing role in her life, a concept that is a central component of contemporary grief theory (Neimeyer 2011, 375). The previous negative interference from the voice of the widow is no longer represented in the text as a hindrance to this relationship.

Furthermore, the new life in the country represents a catalyst for reflection and mediates the experience of grief. It inhabits a central role in MacKellar's writing. In the latter part of the memoir, MacKellar repeatedly presents vignettes of farm life, narrating in depth the soothing and grounding nature of the country: "Digging locates me. I stop struggling for words and concentrate on the ground. I push my spade into the soil and turn over the manure. The physical effort soothes" (158). The act of observing nature plays an influential role in MacKellar's textual repositioning: "The burdens of living seem to shrink in front of the beauty of a rearing horse" (164). She frames the concept of beauty as the catalyst for transformation, reflecting that she expected to

retreat and hide in the country, to inhabit hopelessness, but instead found beauty, adding that “existence depends on beauty” (154). MacKellar narrates that lying on the ground and enjoying the feel of the earth made her realise that “this place is tattooed into me” (185-186). The connection to her mother’s childhood home and being grounded in nature allows MacKellar to reconcile the loss of her mother and to find inner peace.

### **Repositioning the identities of wife and widow: dating again**

All of the memoirs discussed in this exegesis negotiate the identity of happily married wife, which is represented as cherished - “It had taken me 26 years to meet the love of my life and soulmate” (Brownlee 109) - by juxtaposing it with another prominent position that is narrated in the post-loss landscape: yearning for new love and dating. This new position is placed in dialogue with the complex conflictual relationship between the identity of widow and of wife, thus forming a layered, dynamic and triangular relationship between these positions. The intricate juxtaposing of these three positions reflects the polyvocal nature (Smith and Watson 2010, 80) of the dialogical self.

The issue of having sex or wanting to date again is portrayed in many of the young widow memoirs. Great internal conflict is shown on the topic of sex by giving voice to the dialogical relations between the consciously chosen identity of wife, who still feels married, and the resisted and imposed identity of widow, who feels lonely and whose body begins to announce its returned libido at some stage following her loss. The past - the remembered position of being happily married - is the benchmark from which the memoirist looks towards the future. When the issue of dating is first represented in the narratives, the authors express the belief that, having been fortunate enough to have found true love once, they do not intend to have a relationship with another man again. Brownlee states her intent to remain single: “I had sworn to myself and everyone else that there was only ever one man for me” (186). In this conflictual juxtaposing of the identity of wife and of dating, the former is initially represented as dominant. Aikman uses inner monologue to show her incredulity at the very thought of ever being as close again to another man as she had been to her husband: “Could I conceive, ever again, of

letting one person matter to me as much as the one I'd lost?" (228). Hermans argues that dialogical relations between positions are shaped by dominance, which he sees as an intrinsic feature of the dialogical self (2004, 178). Aikman's and Brownlee's post-loss positions of wife are narratively expressed as dominant over the desire to date: the authors' feeling of having experienced true love in their marriage serves as a roadblock to having sex and to dating again. Aikman categorically states: "Dating, in particular, was out of the question during my first two years of widowhood" (112).

However, I argue that in the act of autobiographical identity construction that takes place in the memoirs through the negotiation of positions, the dialogical relationship between the identities of wife, widow and dating undergoes an identity transformation: the initially resisted sexual identity begins to give herself permission to feel desire and even contentment regarding the possible position of a new relationship. One way in which identity transformation takes place is through the introduction of a new position. A new position that is initially placed in conflict with the identity of wife is the voice that considers dating again. Awareness and presence of sexuality is a new embodied position that is introduced into the existing dialogue between the narrative identities of wife, widow and the identity that longs to date. Here the material body is positioned as the catalyst for the textual re-negotiation between these positions in the form of the physical stirrings of the returning libido, which is represented as occurring at the will of the body and in opposition to felt emotion, thus foregrounding the embodiment of experience. Whereas the embodied voice of grief discussed previously contributed to the fragmentation of the self, here we see the embodied position of acknowledged sexuality as contributing to the textual rebuilding of the self.

As the feelings of sexual arousal return suddenly, they are shown to take the memoirists by surprise. In the narratives, the physical sensations are represented as being at odds with the belief that the authors do not want to have sex with another man. As such, the body gives voice to its own language. Brownlee describes this mixture of feelings evoked by the first stirrings of her libido:

An emotion was stirring within me, as I watched K.P conducting his excavation, long after I'd resigned myself to never feeling it again. Unmistakably, there it was: lust. And even the merest thought of it brought me out in invisible hives of shame ... For the first time since Mark's death, the pulse of sexual attraction for another man had incontestably begun to beat. I felt titillated and vaguely horrified in equal measure. (185–87)

To the position of wife, her sexual identity is immediately unfathomable to herself. She is shown to feel hijacked by her own body. When Aikman narrates opening herself up to dating, she is not interested in casual sex, but yearns for the intimate connection that she had with her husband:

I had no moral objection to casual sex. But when I was married to Bernie, I was making love with the man who was my closest friend, my most intimate confidant. Sex and comfort went together. Believe me, I had the urge for sex after he died, but the idea of a one-night stand was just too depressing. I'd had the whole package, and I wanted it again. (212–13)

The desire to date evokes multiple positions that are juxtaposed in the text in an act of representing this chorus of voices: the identity of having been happily married, which was initially positioned as an obstruction to dating, is now repositioned to serve as the impetus to seek love again. It is placed in conflict with the imagined position of having casual sex. Feeling terrified about having sex with a man other than her husband is also narratively positioned within these dialogical relations. Using self-deprecating humor and repetition, Aikman sums up how fearful she feels: "What really scared me - emotional engagement, sex, entanglement in someone else's life, sex, responsibility for another person, sex. Love, marriage, illness, death, sex. Oh, and did I mention sex?" (194).

As outlined in Chapter 1, Hermans suggests that the self recreates identity continuity and a relatively stable sense of self through the process of innovation, which he conceptualises as an intrinsic element of the dialogical

self. He suggests that this can be achieved in different ways. Firstly, new identities can be narratively introduced. Secondly, innovation can be achieved through a “change in dominance relations”, whereby the domination of one position over another is mediated and shifted, so that the suppressed identity can narratively enter the dialogical relations to a greater degree (2004, 178). Whilst initially the position of having been happily married dominated the identity that desired to date, yearning for love and the longing to enter another committed relationship – expressed in Aikman’s notion of wanting “the full package again” - mediates this power dynamic. Renegotiation takes place whereby the desire for a new relationship is no longer repressed, but repositioned as a motivator to actively seek love.

Unlike Aikman, Brownlee does not shy away from casual sex. She represents her ongoing affair with the plumber who first stirred her sexual desire in graphic language and vivid detail:

He continued banging me against the settee, perfectly in time with the percussive barking of the dog who watched from the armchair opposite ... He had unleashed a demon within this lonely widow ... I’d greet him at the door in heels, stockings and not much else, and we’d barely make it up the stairs before he was done and we were in the lounge arranging our next liaison. (190-91)

Brownlee’s identity that asserted that she would never have sex with another man again is repositioned in the text with the graphic representation of casual sex.

### **The role of friendship in rebuilding identity**

Aikman’s rejected position of “young widow”, in particular of feeling out of place with her contemporaries and older widows, is mediated in the text by being narratively positioned in harmony with the friendship with other young widows. Due to young widowhood being such a rare life event, Aikman narrates that she could not find contemporaries who shared her experience.

Disheartened with an older widow support group, and in the absence of young widow groups, she started her own group through word of mouth with five other widows, which she refers to as her “amateur widow’s support scheme” (44). The women called themselves the “Saturday Night Widows”, because they began to meet once a month on a Saturday night - which they perceived to be the loneliest night of the week.

By drawing on humour, Aikman expresses her delighted surprise that the subject of new love and sex came up on the first meeting of the Saturday Night Widows: “I surely hadn’t expected to find bonking on the agenda, in whatever position, within the first couple hours of our acquaintance” (51). Her tone turns serious when she continues: “But sex, I recognized, was something widows couldn’t talk about with anybody else, even though sex, companionship, love, lust ... weren’t frivolous concerns. They were some of the foremost features of a happy life” (51). Aikman’s position of out-of-place young widow is juxtaposed in the text with the external positions of the other young widows, who occupy identity positions in Aikman’s own construction of identity in accord with the dialogical self (2008, 188). This identity is represented as finding solace in the fact that she is no longer alone.

Here, the narrative reconstruction of Aikman’s identity takes place in two ways. Firstly, through the introduction of new positions, in this case external others who are represented in the text through dialogue which is narrated throughout the memoir. The chapters are structured around the monthly meetings of the Saturday Night Widows. Secondly, identity reconstruction occurs through the change in power relations between Aikman’s identities. For example, the disempowered position of lonely young widow is mediated through the dynamic dialogical interplay with the other widows, who offer assurance and the comfort of friendship and kinship, so that this position is no longer disempowered. Aikman positions herself as being aware of having overcome adversity, both through a shift in internal power and the influence of friendship: “That’s what being a widow is all about: navigating a foreign land, triumphing over adversity” (180).



Hermans views the rebuilding of a relatively stable sense of self as narrative coherence that is constructed in personal narratives out of multiple, often conflictual identities through the process of positioning, repositioning and negotiation of dialogical relationships (2008, 189). In accord with this theoretical position the memoirs can be said to construct narrative coherence. And in that renewed coherence, identity continuity, hope and engagement with the future are evident: “After so long I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I recognized it – a kernel of contentment. My brain still resisted in part, but I felt a deep sense of peace for the first time in almost 2 years” (Brownlee 308). Aikman expresses a sense of happiness: “I had learned that one life doesn’t have to end because another one does. Mine continued to offer up surprises, many of them happy ones” (14).

In contrast to Aikman and Brownlee, Fontana does not narrate dating. She ends her book with the spreading of her husband’s ashes and her tone is still wounded. However, in the epilogue that follows she dares to hope for the future: “As the days pass and my heart heals it expands with the possibility that I can have love again ... I imagine the joy of loving again” (416). Fontana, the passionate political activist, is heartened by the fact that her organisation continues: “Amazingly, my organization is still thriving” (417). She positions and evaluates her role as activist in a way that allows her to feel connected to her husband and to become a philanthropist in his honour, thus renegotiating the identity of widow. Like Aikman, Fontana also finds solace in friendship with other young widows. She devotes considerable space in her memoir to portraying the close emotional bond that forms between herself and the other young widows who lost husbands from the same firefighting unit. The double common ground between being 9/11 widows and firefighters’ widows prompts a strong bond of community and friendship.

Fontana refers to the other widows as her “comrades in arms” (147), thus indicating a sense of community, alliance building, and shared power that is characteristic of “Inclusionary Othering”, which Mary Canales defines as “a process that attempts to utilize power within relationships for

transformation and coalition building” (2000, 19). By drawing on the metaphor of warfare in the context of 9/11 widowhood, Fontana highlights the violent loss the widows share. The firefighter widows become so close that, like Aikman’s group, they also refer to themselves as a “widow’s club”, thus signifying the importance of their friendship. One friendship in particular becomes constitutive of Fontana’s identity construction. Fontana represents her bond with Theresa, another firefighter widow, as an integral part of her post-loss life and selfhood: “We have become close lately, spending hours on the phone each night” (193). She writes: “No matter how busy I am, her calls have become part of my new routine” (205). Given the importance of interpersonal relationships to our identity construction, Fontana portrays the closeness of their friendship: “I can read Theresa so well now, anticipating her moods and feelings the way I used to Dave’s” (356). By likening their closeness to her relationship with her husband, she signifies friendship to be crucial to her rebuilding of identity.

Like Aikman and Fontana, Breitweiser also represents friendship as central to and constitutive of rebuilding her self. She devotes a significant portion of her book to describing the friendship with the three other 9/11 widows who came to be known as the “Jersey Girls”. Breitweiser uses second person narration to express the importance of this friendship in the Acknowledgements that open the memoir:

I would not be alive today without our friendship. You have taught me how to survive and how to fight. How to laugh. How to be strong. And how to cry. Together we have achieved so much. I am so very deeply proud to have you as my closest and truest friends. (n.p.)

The young widow memoir frames friendship with women as constitutive of facilitating recovery. Breitweiser writes in the Acknowledgements: “I never understood the power of female friendships”(94). Like Fontana, she portrays the friendship with the other widows as being as close as her relationship with her deceased husband: “Patty, Lorie, and Mindy, became closer to me than anyone other than Ron, and that’s been a revelation. Without them, I would never have left the house. With them, I found courage within myself I

never knew I had” (94). Representing the closeness of the friendships that were formed after the event of widowhood and devoting large sections of the memoirs to that representation facilitates the negotiation of identity. The voice of the widow that was shown to be devastated by the absence of intimacy and closeness following loss constructs a new kind of closeness that is portrayed to fill some of the void left by widowhood and provides the catalyst for finding inner strength: female friendship.

### **“Textured recovery” (Prodromou 2015)**

Although having demonstrated that the young widow memoirs under review construct narrative coherence and a relatively stable sense of self, this is not the case for all memoirs of this genre. In writing against the redemptive arc evident in contemporary commercially published memoir, Prodromou has argued for a new sub-genre of memoir which she has conceptualised as “memoirs of textured recovery”, on the grounds that those texts resist explicit redemption and “deviate ... from typical narratives of loss” (2012, 7). Breitweiser’s memoir can be said to fall under Prodromou’s category of textured recovery. Although she voices hope for the future at the end of her memoir in her final letter to her deceased husband, whereby Breitweiser assures him that she and their daughter are all right: “I have learned to know that being okay is good enough. I now look forward with hope to having a future where the good things outnumber the bad” (n.p.), she nevertheless portrays herself as remaining aggrieved by the fact that neither the government nor any intelligence agency had been held accountable at the time of publication for what she sees as the failures by the American government to prevent 9/11: “I wish more than anything that I could end this final chapter on a positive note. ... But there is no happy ending here. At least not yet” (272).

In a performative act that is characteristic of Breitweiser’s emphasis on her political activism, she does not finish the book with her private letter to her husband, but adds an afterword addressed to the political commentator Ann Coulter, where she defends herself against Coulter’s attacks on her, such as

labelling her and the other activist widows “media whores” (284). Breitweiser finishes her memoir on a political rather than personal note.

Whilst Fontana’s political activism is framed as constitutive of constructing identity continuity, Breitweiser’s political activism is shown to be unresolved, which is not framed as all consuming, but, in alignment with Prodromou’s notion of “textured recovery”, narrates the experience of loss in “all its complex nuances” (2015, 82) and is represented alongside her notion of personal hope. Despite portraying hope for her personal future, Breitweiser continues to foreground her loss. In relation to a treasured fingerprint artwork her husband and daughter had made together, she writes: “It represents a time of innocence and happiness. A time I doubt I will ever find again” (250).

Prodromou suggests that memoirs of textured recovery do not give “prescriptive definitions of loss”, and that they complicate the representation of loss through “endings that are deliberately ambiguous with questions left unanswered” (2015, 3, 5). Breitweiser’s ending, with its parallel representations of hope for the future and ongoing pain evoked by an irretrievable past, offers just such an ambiguous ending. She also portrays herself at the end of the memoir as still having questions, wondering how an “all-American family” like hers faced such tragedy despite living life “as good, responsible people. So how could anything bad ever happen to us?” (271). What is more, she presents herself as still feeling scared after five years (271), thus signifying some ongoing identity discontinuity.

Hermans argues that the autobiographical narrator has agency, which is enacted in the “continuous appropriation and rejection of thoughts by which the self-as-knower proves itself to be an active processor of experience” (2004, 177). In representing the identities of wife and widow, as well as the multiple positions of political activist, single parent and the selves that date and savour friendship, the memoirists show themselves to be “active processors of their experience” of young widowhood through positioning and repositioning identities and reflecting upon and interpreting their experiences. In enacting autobiographical subjectivity, the authors discussed reclaim agency and all but Breitweiser reconstruct identity continuity. Notably, even

Breitweiser's memoir shows a significant level of identity continuity. Although the texts rebuild the authors' identity and construct narrative coherence, the memoir endings are not to be seen as simplistic and lacking complexity. On the contrary, these memoirs show grief to be a complex dialogical, multilayered and ongoing developmental process.

## Chapter 6: The Ethics of Writing about my Deceased Husband

This chapter turns its gaze on my own dialogical process in the writing of my memoir. Specifically, it focuses on one aspect of that process: the negotiation of my subject positions of widow and memoirist in order to reflect on the ethical dilemmas raised by writing about my deceased husband. Drawing on Couser's work on vulnerable subjects, I argue that ethical and moral obligations continue beyond death and see my deceased husband as a vulnerable other who deserves that I give those obligations my utmost consideration. Writing about the death of an intimate other poses a range of ethical questions and considerations. This is particularly the case because, as Couser suggests, the dead might be considered to be the most vulnerable subjects of all because of the impossibility of defending themselves against misrepresentation, even though legally all rights to privacy cease with death (2003, 6). With this sentiment in mind, I examine how I navigated the ethical representation of my husband in the text and ethical questions that were raised in the process of writing my memoir and completing my research.

An ongoing debate engaging with the complexities of the ethics of life writing has been taking place in autobiography studies, in particular since the publication of Couser's *Vulnerable Subjects* (2003) and Eakin's *The Ethics of Life Writing* in (2004). Autobiography practitioners and theorists, psychologists and autoethnography scholars investigating the ethical dilemmas of writing about others agree that there are no easy answers to be had, no universal guidelines or definitive rules (Ellis 2007, 5; Freadman 2004, 134; Mosher and Berman 2015, 100). Stephen Andrew and Zoë Krupka lament "the absence of a coherent and philosophical framework" memoirists can draw on: "Despite an ongoing and longstanding debate about the writer's responsibility for any pain experienced by those people identified in both fictional and personal works, we haven't come very far in the formulation of an ethics of memoir" (2015, n.p.) One of the reasons why is, as Eakin suggests, that formulations of the ethics of life writing are culturally specific

(2004, 6). Australian scholar Sue Joseph also emphasises the cultural dimensions of creative non-fiction genre writing, suggesting that it is important to “develop our own idiosyncratic grasp” of this genre (2016, xvii). In accord with Eakin and Joseph, this reflection on the dialogical process of writing my memoir is seen to be a culturally specific, that is Australian, contribution to the debate on the ethics of life writing.

My memoir narrates my husband’s illness, recounting the eight-month-period in which he was locked into his body, and his subsequent death. Locked-in-syndrome is a very rare neurological disorder which causes complete paralysis except for eye movement. The patient is cognitively aware, but can neither move nor speak. In addition to portraying the fragmented and complex nature of recovery from grief, becoming a single mother and reconstructing my identity, the text narrates an inner struggle of coming to terms with multiple injustices within medical and legal institutions, including the initial misdiagnosis and the subsequent medical negligence trial, and my attempts to break free from these experiences without bitterness. My young widow memoir is naturally centred on the intimate relationship with my husband that lies at the heart of the story and the loss of that relationship with all that it entailed: a shared life and love, raising our children together and our envisaged future together. Like all writers narrating relational memoirs (McCooley 2009, 329), I faced a multitude of ethical considerations. The fact that my husband was deceased and that I could not show him my manuscript or discuss it with him magnified the importance of giving deep thought to my ethical approach.

*The Dictionary of Modern Thought* defines ethics as a branch of philosophy that “investigates morality” and conceptualises ethics as being concerned with “the rightness and wrongness of actions, the virtue or vice of the motives ... and the goodness or badness of the consequences” (1988, 285). The application of ethics in relation to the ethics of writing about the deceased is complex and there are various considerations to be regarded, such as privacy, writerly deliberations in relation to truth and the autobiographical pact, legalities, university guidelines and ethics committees. Couser suggests

that harm can be done to a person textually portrayed in relation to their privacy, reputation and integrity as individuals (2003, 42). He advocates strict ethical consideration of the representation of vulnerable subjects. Importantly, he argues that, although the state of death suggests an “invulnerability to harm”, death can actually be seen as the ultimate state of “vulnerability and dependency” in that we trust that we will be respected after we die (2003, 16). The scholarly debate on the ethics of life writing shines the limelight on trust in relation to the representation of others in the text (Couser 2003; Eakin 2004; Freadman 2004; Miller 2009). I concur with Couser’s argument that interpersonal trust survives death (2003, 51). Couser points out that, legally, ethical standards change with death, in that the right to privacy ceases with death (2003, 6). This means that all ethical considerations in relation to writing about my husband are of a moral rather than legal nature.

I navigated the ethical territory of writing about my deceased husband by contemplating it at length, and not just initially, but throughout the writing, redrafting and editing process. I see awareness of, and commitment to, ethics not as fixed, but as a dynamic, ongoing process. I asked myself: would Mark have agreed to the writing of my memoir? As I cannot answer this question with certainty, I could only imagine what he would have thought about my decision to write about his illness and death. As noted previously, a significant other is constitutive of the dialogical self. Here I show Mark to be constitutive of my selfhood, in particular in relation to my ethical and moral self.

Paul Mosher and Jeffrey Berman investigate the dilemmas of privacy and pose the question: What are the moral and ethical responsibilities for a writer depicting a deceased person? They suggest that there are no easy answers to such haunting questions, or even “*any* answers” (2015, 100, emphasis in original). There are a number of ethical considerations revolving around boundaries relating to privacy and in relation to the boundaries between self and other in my memoir. The present discussion hopes to explore some



ethical considerations at play in order to demonstrate the complexities arising from depicting a deceased partner.

Given the intertwined nature of the self and the very otherness of a spouse, writing about a deceased husband is an ethical minefield. I could not write my story without narrating Mark's story of illness and death, as it is our story of shared experience. As such, my position of wife and widow was engaged in constant dialogical debate with the position of memoirist. Further, as a remembered other, Mark was an external other whom I had internalised in accord with Herman's concept of the other-in-the-self, and this position was also involved in the autobiographical dialogical process.

Freadman argues that as self-revelation necessitates revelations about others, the "moral issue is where to draw the line" (2004, 128). This loose and shifting concept of *where to draw the line* between my quest to tell my story of our shared experience and my husband's privacy lies at the heart of my ethical concerns. The concerns I experienced in delimiting the otherness of my husband and his identity in the text are echoed by Eakin: "It is difficult not only to determine the boundaries or the other's privacy, but indeed to delimit the very otherness of the other's identity" (1999, 176). As noted in Chapter 2, bereavement scholars Colin Parkes and Holly Prigerson also emphasise the blurred nature of the boundaries between the self and our intimate other, stating that the question must arise: "Is my spouse a part of me?" (2010, 109). Given that, in narrating Mark's illness, I portrayed shared experience that cannot be neatly dissected from one another, I was unsure of the boundaries between us.

Attempting to answer my question regarding Mark's affirmation of my memoir was not straightforward. Freadman flags "situations that were way beyond the imaginative purview of the deceased" as problematic (2004, 131). My husband's extreme experience of being locked into his body was outside of anything he could have predicted and it must have had a profound effect on his thinking and outlook. As Mark was not able to communicate because of his total paralysis, he could not share his inner thoughts and emotions with me in any way. In making ethical decisions about representing him in the

text, I had to rely solely on my perception of the type of person Mark was. He had always had a strong social conscience and, after deliberation, I felt that he would have agreed to my memoir. He would have wanted to contribute to social change regarding the rigid nature of the medical system, in particular to prevent others having to suffer the way he did because he had not been given access to a pain management specialist. He also would have appreciated that my memoir would provide answers, although difficult ones, for our children.

I was further spurred to consider ethical questions as I enrolled in a Masters degree in creative writing about five years after my husband had passed away and, following this, a PhD.<sup>15</sup> The academic environment has had a unique impact on my awareness and application of ethics to my memoir writing. The ethics of life writing would never have come to my attention to the degree that it has if I had written my memoir outside the academy. The importance of ethics in personal narrative was initially brought to my attention during my Masters degree at Murdoch University. I was required to obtain ethics clearance for my grief memoir. This surprised me, as I assumed that this was only applicable to conducting interviews. The process of applying for ethics approval required me to discuss my autobiographical writing with an ethics advisor and to seek written consent from family members and close friends I wrote about, including my children who were under-age at the time. It raised important considerations in regards to privacy for me. Eakin tells us that he was “struck by the complexity of the issues and situations that an ethics of life writing must address” (2004, 14). With the application for ethics clearance fresh in my mind, I felt the same.

Having decided that Mark would have agreed to my memoir, I then faced multiple individual decisions about specific scenes. One of the most difficult ethical decisions concerned conveying his illness. Preserving Mark’s dignity

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<sup>15</sup> My Masters and PhD differ in their approach. The MPhil includes personal narrative that depicts the first week of my husband’s hospital stay, whereas my PhD narrates a book length memoir which begins with the shock of diagnosis over a week later. In terms of theoretical approach, my Masters researched the healing benefits of writing by examining Walter Mikac’s memoir *to have and to hold* (1997), which portrays multiple losses. The doctorate focuses on a comparative study of women’s spousal loss memoirs post 2000, and investigates the narrative devices used by the authors to rebuild their identity.

while describing his deterioration whilst locked in his body and all that this entailed was of foremost importance to me. Although I describe to some degree how he looked and what effect the illness had on his body, I deliberately chose not to describe certain scenes, for example those related to incontinence and particular physiotherapist procedures, in order to preserve his privacy. Having said that, my memoir gives a detailed account of his illness and as such indisputably brings my husband's private lived experience into the public realm. This was a difficult decision, because I knew my husband to be a very private person. I felt that Mark would not have wanted aspects of his severe physical deterioration publicly revealed. This posed an immediate ethical dilemma. I asked myself if I was breaching my own ethical code. I remained unsure, but I consider that it is justifiable in some circumstances to do so. Revealing shortcomings in the medical system that need rectifying for the good of all is one such circumstance. Frank points to the need for writers to contextualise and to be specific, and to seek confirmation for ethical decisions by communication with others: "We do not act on principles that hold for all times. We act as best we can at a particular time, guided by certain stories that speak to that time, and other people's dialogical affirmation that we have chosen the right stories" (2004, 191). Richard Freadman also posits that each case has to be "considered in context and with respect to the rights ... and feelings of those involved" (2004, 124). In the absence of Mark's affirmation, I could only make those decisions that seemed most ethical to me.

I could not tell my story - my experience of Mark's illness and of seeing him suffering and the intense impact this had on me - without showing at least some of the effects of his complete paralysis. In narrating how Mark looked, I consciously determined to focus on the emotional effect this had on me and others, in particular our children. Vivian Gornick argues that a memoir is made up of two components, the situation, which is the description of context, and the story. Creating a story out of a situation, Gornick suggests, requires a narrating voice which goes on an inner journey, and comes to some realisation at the end: "The story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to

say” (2001, 13). My inner journey could only be represented and discovered in the text by narrating the specific situation and my traumatic experiences which preceded my adaptation to losing Mark.

My ethical concerns around Mark’s privacy and dignity became my constant companions during the writing process. It took me a while to recognise that my inner ethical watchdog had become so vigilant during the writing of the first draft that it stifled the creative process at times. I discussed the conflict between my creative writing process and internal ethical editor with my fellow postgraduate students in our regular creative practice workshop. Through discussion and feedback from others on scenes that were written under the stern gaze of my inner watchdog, I concluded that the internal ethical editor had no place in the initial writing process. It was an epiphany for me to acknowledge that to get into and stay in the creative flow, I could not engage with ethical editing and critiquing the writing *while* I was writing the first draft.

Patricia Hampl argues that a “careful first draft is a failed first draft” and reports that in her own practice she “lets pretty much anything happen in a first draft”. She elaborates that

writing a first draft is like meeting someone for the first time .... Intimacy with a piece of writing, as with a person, comes from paying attention to the revelations it is capable of giving, not by imposing my own notions and agenda, no matter how well intentioned they might be. (1999, 28)

I decided not to be anxious about ethics *during* the creative writing. This immediately lifted a heavy burden and freed up my writing. I then undertook my creative writing in the knowledge that the initial draft was for my eyes alone until I had unleashed my watchdog to edit or flag anything that might comprise any ethical concerns.

Contemplation has been a major part of my creative writing process. A lot of my ethical deliberations and decisions dawned upon me in the middle of the night or the early morning hours. The zone between sleeping and being fully

awake can be described as a different state of consciousness. At these times, consciousness is not yet overloaded with the usual clutter that is so characteristic of our modern minds and I found my mind to be marked by sharpened clarity. I often woke up and thought about the ethics of a particular scene that I had been working on. And answers came to me. Sometimes it became clear that I needed to remove scenes or reword them. When I felt the need to delete a scene, I thought afterwards how obvious this seemed in hindsight. Removal was always based on a combination of previous deliberate contemplation and my insights gained during the not-yet fully awake state of consciousness. Shirley Hazzard points to the need for silence in writers' quests to discover what they truly think and argues that "some distance and detachment are needed before the concept can be realized" (2016, 10). The space provided by silence was a major aspect of my creative process, including the consideration of ethics.

Altering or removing scenes or even a single word was frequently driven by my desire not to hurt the feelings of someone close to me. The debate on the ethics of life writing is centred on the issue of potential harm to others portrayed in the text (Eakin 2004, 4). I concur with Andrew and Krupka that we need to address the issue of harm in life writing explicitly and not to hide in "the soft arms of artistic licence or the safe harbour of anonymity" and that we should distinguish between harm and discomfort (2015, n.p.). This can be hard to gauge and goes back to the issue of making decisions about *drawing the line* between the need to tell my story and respecting the privacy and sensitivities of others. I suggest the potential for harm extends right down to the level of individual words. Hazzard emphasises the writer's responsibility concerning language and the "responsibility to the accurate word" (2016, 6, 11). I was acutely aware that individual words are powerful, signify meaning and are coloured by connotation. A single word could mean the difference between ethical representation, discomfort or harm. For example, meaning differs significantly in describing a specialist's interaction with me as either cruel, cold, detached or impersonal.

I was acutely aware of the fragmentary nature of memory, specifically the recollection of details about my husband's lengthy hospital stay. I do claim, however, that my emotional memory is crisp and vivid and that I portray my emotional truth accurately. I was committed to the factual reporting of my husband's illness and in the text I flag to the reader when my memory is blurred or missing. In terms of the autobiographical pact, which I view as fundamental, I made frequent recourse to the diaries I had kept throughout my husband's illness as well as to medical records. Philippe Lejeune himself has elaborated on his concept of the autobiographical pact by highlighting that the pact refers to the author's intention to tell the truth (2005, 31, cited in Schmitt and Kjerkegaard 2016, 569). Like creative nonfiction writer Nancy Mairs, I write with the intention to "tell the truth as I know it" (2009, 90). In the narrative journey of (self)-discovery I am true to myself. I believe that with these intentions I fulfil my autobiographical pact with the reader.

In accord with the DST concept of innovation (Hermans 2008, 193), my position of writer was a new identity that was positioned and repositioned in allegiance with my identity of young widow. During the lengthy process of writing, my position of memoirist frequently repositioned my identity of widow by providing new perspectives to that self. Writing juxtaposed my past experiences of witnessing my husband's suffering with reflections from the point of view of the present and forged insights that transformed the beliefs and experiences of the young widow. As such, in accord with the DST concept of the spatial self and the central role played by evaluation (Hermans 2001, 341), the interpretation undertaken by my young widow identity in response to repositioning was central to the rebuilding of identity continuity. For example, it was the position of writer that allowed the young widow to discover that her trauma and her grief were intertwined but separate selves. This understanding altered the perspective and beliefs of the young widow position, who then changed her approach towards healing from her trauma. This directly contributed to the recovery from trauma of the young widow, thus reconciling the embodied position of being traumatised with that of the young widow.

In writing the memoir, the position of ethical writer and the remembered position of wife were placed both in conflict and in agreement. According to DST, positions can be juxtaposed in various ways, including in agreement and disagreement (Hermans and Gieser, 2011a, 2). The conflict arose from the deep desire held by the position of wife to honour her husband's memory, to treat his memory and the recollection of his illness with dignity. Protecting my husband's privacy was crucial to my position of wife, but the very nature of a relational memoir is the recollection of the significant other performed by the writer. The writer position made ethical decisions that the wife was morally comfortable with, and as such the two positions were integrated. Agreement took place in the shared goals of the positions of writer and wife to honour Mark, to bear witness to his illness and death, and to provide a legacy that can make a difference by helping others.

In exploring these issues I hope to raise questions regarding the representation of the dead for scholarly debate. For example, in representing Mark as a person with full rights even though he could not communicate, I am making a case that all people have value and that ability to communicate is not the full mark of personhood. I have argued that authors of autobiographical texts narrating the deceased need to be aware of the complex, multi-layered nature of ethical decision-making. To conclude, I agree with Andrew and Krupka that when it comes to the ethics of memoir writing, authors "need to be able to say we gave it some real thought" (2015, n.p.).

## Conclusion

In this exegesis I have undertaken a scholarly examination of the representation of grief and the (re)construction of narrative identity in the young widow memoir. To this end I analysed six young widow memoirs and the narrative devices and strategies used within them as a means of exploring fractured identity and experiences of loss and recovery. The dynamic autobiographical process of positioning and repositioning pre- and post-loss subject positions facilitated the rebuilding of a relatively stable sense of identity out of a self that was represented as fragmented by young widowhood. I have argued that it is possible for a relatively stable sense of self to be constructed in texts that represent fragmentation of the self occasioned by spousal bereavement and that all the memoirs under review showed the rebuilding of such a relatively stable identity. Even Breitweiser's memoir, the ending of which may be regarded as textured and ambiguous, also portrayed the reconstruction of identity continuity. As such, I have conceptualised autobiographical writing as a medium that is well-suited to the narrative rebuilding of identity following bereavement.

Even though there has been a noticeable increase in commercial grief memoirs since the publication of Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, research into grief memoirs has been limited compared to the extensive body of memoir scholarship. This exegesis contributes knowledge to grief memoir scholarship and to debates on narrative and identity in autobiography studies. I have made a case for the sub-genre of the young widow memoir as an academic category worthy of critical attention and argued that this emergent form of creative non-fiction writing deserves and requires scholarly attention. Age and untimely loss play a key role in the experience of widowhood.

An intimate interplay took place between the writing of my memoir and my exegesis, whereby the two informed each other. I started my doctorate by writing the initial draft of my memoir. Hampl argues that it is vital for the creative writing process to let the first draft flow onto the pages without



interference from outside sources, and without premature editing (1999, 28). In view of my creative practice, I would argue that this is especially true for writing about grief and trauma. In particular, the first part of my memoir, which depicts my husband's extreme illness, had to be written in whatever way it needed to come onto the page. This initial draft that portrayed my husband's suffering did not include much reflection. Such reflection comes with hindsight and is one of the defining characteristics of memoir (Birkerts 2008, 23). The first draft narrating my husband's illness represented my lived experience of being in crisis mode, which lacked reflection. By contrast, the first draft of the narrative depicting my widowhood and recovery from grief seamlessly included reflection.

Having written the first draft, I began to research young widow memoirs as well as autobiography and narrative psychology theory. My reading of grief memoirs was informed by my creative practice. In particular, through my own writing I had developed a deeper understanding of the application of creative non-fiction narrative devices and techniques, which facilitated my research and textual analysis. I identified prominent narrative devices including metaphor, dialogue, inner monologue, the use of flashbacks and change in narrative tone and rhythm, as well as the less frequently used devices of sarcasm, irony, capitalisation and exclamation marks. My creative practice methodology allowed me to examine the author's voice, for example, identifying the uniqueness of Fontana's memoir, whereby nearly the whole book was written in the style of showing and lacking in change of pace. This can be contrasted to Breitweiser's memoir, which features an almost opposite tone of non-emotional representation and the prominent inclusion of telling.

In terms of theory, I applied the lens of practitioner as well as theorist to my textual analysis. For example, employing the methodology of DST, I developed a deeper understanding of positions as a result of having written my first draft. I recognised the difference between integrating and reconciling positions. I had represented my own subject position in a way that had made my recovery dependent upon making sense of my husband's suffering. This

was very similar to MacKellar's subject position that had made her recovery dependent upon understanding her husband's suicide. Both positions were integrated in the autobiographical process through acceptance that some things cannot be comprehended or reconciled, however, the desire to understand remained.

My exploration of memoir scholarship also contributed to the redrafting process of my memoir. Following theoretical engagement with memoir through works by critics such as Couser, Birkerts and Lee Gutkind, I reworked my approach to the first part of my creative work and changed its structure by adding passages of reflection to the text. Such passages serve to provide the reader with an expanded view of the protagonist's internal landscape. Further deliberate changes in structure resulted from having read the memoirs under review and applying the lens of reader to my own work. After reading 9/11 memoirs, I recognised the importance of occasionally shifting the focus from trauma to include more positive scenes. Having read and thought about providing some emotional relief to the reader, I went back and reworked my previous approach, which was to have flashbacks about the early life of my husband and myself, which portray happy times, as stand-alone chapters. Instead, I inserted shorter flashbacks throughout my chapters in order to provide a change of pace and perspective to the reader from the hospital scenes. Also, I decided to open my memoir with a poignant flashback, that of my first encounter with my future husband on a train in Egypt, in order to open with a positive rather than traumatic scene.

Reading the published memoirs also prompted consideration about changes of pace in my text. As a reader, I found that Fontana's slow pace with an almost exclusive reliance on showing was overwhelming in its unchanging narrative tone. The fact that it was well written on a sentence-level yet protracted on a larger structural scale highlighted the importance of structure to me, and in my redrafting I paid close attention to narrative construction and pace, ensuring that showing was interspersed with some telling. Further, my experience of reading Brownlee's black humour and sarcasm, which I found

to be alienating, made me conscious of writing myself without employing sarcasm.

In addition, DST made me aware of the representation and repositioning of my own identities portrayed in my memoir. This theoretical understanding contributed to the redrafting of my narrative, prompting me to add in reflections that represented a deepened understanding of those positions.

Having examined the critique within autobiography scholarship (Prodromou, 2015; Robertson, 2012) of the overly simplistic redemption narrative arc, I consciously avoided replicating the naiveté of that arc. Prodromou's work on the representation of textured and nuanced recovery prompted me to represent my adaptation to grief with nuance, thus avoiding simplistic redemption. At the same time though, I have represented the transformation and personal growth that resulted from my experience of grief, in particular my recovery from traumatic stress, and showed the positive role played by writing. I was not writing against the redemptive arc, but beyond it. One issue in particular that came to my attention after reading within the field of the young widow memoir was that remarriage was often cast as a marker of recovery. In her 9/11 memoir *Where You Left Me* (2011), Gardner Trulson devotes about half her book to her new relationship and subsequent remarriage. As a reader, we get an in-depth portrayal of her new partner Derek, much more so than the deceased husband Doug, who, as a character, is barely depicted.

The memoirists under review explore the issue of remarriage or re-partnering. Aikman draws on the ironic title "Mr. Right" to give voice to her annoyance with the positioning of remarriage as the cure-all to widowhood: "I remembered how irritated I got when people assured me that finding Mr. Right would put a happy cap on my own story of widowhood, as if that alone would erase all that had happened before. The ol' man trap: thinking a man was a cure-all" (251). She describes a scene that depicts the reaction of others to the news that she has a new partner: "Everyone who'd seen me through the last few years of pitiful circumstances was thrilled for me now, as if I were one of those Hollywood stars up for an Oscar after a spell in rehab"

(252). By drawing on the ironic comparison of winning an Oscar after rehab with her remarriage, she denotes that she is appalled that her new relationship is perceived by her friends and social environment as a marker of salvation from grief. Henderson also depicts such a scene, whereby a stranger approaches her at her husband's funeral with advice: "Don't worry," she said. 'You'll get married again.' ... I turned politely away so she would not see how her words had sliced me open, a fish knife to the belly" (129). Here, embodied metaphor works to signify Henderson's pained reaction and to denote the inappropriateness of this widely-held perception.

I paid close attention to avoiding the representation of remarrying as "redemption", the solution to young widowhood. I was conscious of narrating a balanced portrayal of my own re-partnering in a way that showed the significance of this relationship to my post-loss identity rebuilding, whilst at the same time showing that it did not constitute "recovery", thus representing it as an important life experience, but as a separate story-line independent to my grief. As such, I was deliberately writing against denoting remarriage as a marker of recovery from widowhood.

While grief remains a taboo subject in the Western cultural paradigm, I would argue for the power of autobiographical representations of loss to broaden and alter public perceptions of grief. The young widow memoir contributes to rewriting our understanding of grief. In her theorising of the grief memoir, Bladec proposes - in accord with scholars such as Fowler, Gilbert and Berman - that literary representations of grief "expand our understanding of bereavement" (2014, 936). Prodromou also argues "that grief memoirs help to force death and loss into view in a way that the professional literature of bereavement does not" (2015, 25). Aikman's memoir in particular unsettles the prevailing discourse surrounding grief. Almost five decades after psychologist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross wrote her book *On Death and Dying* (1969), the grieving process is still popularly understood to happen in five stages (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). Aikman was intent on dispelling what she sees as the myths about the five stages of grief in general, and young widowhood in particular. To this end Aikman, an

accomplished journalist, engaged with “serious research into our natural ability to recover after loss” (14). Her narrative draws on interviews with a team of “experimental psychologists” who were “challenging the once-entrenched canons of the field” (70), such as George Bonanno who is said to view the five stages as “plain wrong” (73) and instead argues that grief “oscillates between sadness and normality” (73). Utilising dialogue to depict her conversations with these researchers, Aikman offers the reader another model of grief. The form chosen by Aikman is memoir, with elements of investigative journalism and biography. Aikman utilises sarcasm to attest to the popularity of the five stage model:

Not these again, the Holy Grail of Pathos! Ever since Bernie died, the five stages had been pushed on me by my landlady, a clerk in human resources, the cashier in a taco truck. ... In the last year, I kept checking my calendar, waiting for them to show up ... I wasn't following any stages at all. ... I was failing the stages of grief. I didn't even understand them. (4-5)

Aikman is not alone in critiquing the five-stage-model. Breitweiser also employs sarcasm to repudiate the five stages:

The kind of resurrection I needed wasn't happening in three days and didn't come in pastel colors. Where was I now in the grieving process? Was I bargaining? Don't think so. Denial? Not a chance. Acceptance? No way. Ron's death is completely unacceptable. ... I won't accept it like a package from UPS. (251)

Carter too gives voice to her dissatisfaction with the prescribed five stages: “I loathed the idea of fitting a pattern. My grief felt different, unique only to me .... It seemed ridiculous that everyone should follow these common steps. Surely grieving was as individual as fingerprints” (71). Brownlee also expresses her disillusionment with the existing professional grief literature. She narrates how she underwent an “ordering frenzy” of bereavement literature and read voraciously (71), concluding that “none of them made any sense” (72), thus leaving her bereft of support.

Aikman's memoir not only unsettles the prevailing discourse on grief, it actually contributes to popularising an alternative grief model. The flow-on effect in changing people's perception of the grief process, and in particular in challenging the five stage model, goes beyond the readership of the memoir. Aikman's book attracted significant media coverage<sup>16</sup> and a Wall Street journal article proclaimed Aikman's model as the "new model of grief" (Bernstein, 2014). Further, her example of the supportive, forward-looking, fun-seeking widow group has inspired other widow groups across America.

Like Aikman, I hold the intention that my memoir will deepen the understanding of bereavement by the reader and that it will contribute to discussions about death and dying, thus helping to move the topic of death out of its taboo closet. In particular, I wanted to help others to understand the complexities of grief and to show the role of embodiment in grief, and to dispel the myths of the five stages by informing the reader that Kübler-Ross conceptualised them in relation to the dying and not the bereaved. I also wanted to highlight the importance of communication practices by medical practitioners, particularly regarding recommendations around "withholding treatment".

These intentions were facilitated by two unique features of my memoir. Firstly, it narrates my husband's protracted illness and my experience of being his wife and advocate in addition to my journey of adapting to his loss and traumatic death. In my research I have not come across a spousal bereavement memoir that depicts both of these two journeys in detail: the husband's illness and the author's recovery. Secondly, my memoir was written over a decade after the event, thus affording me, as author, a level of hindsight and reflection that differs from the vantage point of greater immediacy. Many of the young widow memoirs were written soon after the bereavement, such as Brownlee's. Fontana's memoir, which was published four years after 9/11, depicts only the first year afterwards. My research indicates that within the field of the young widow memoir most of the books were published within four or five years of bereavement, the longest timespan being Aikman's memoir which was published after eight years.

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<sup>16</sup>[www.beckyaikman.com/media](http://www.beckyaikman.com/media)

Given that the books had to be written and undergo the lengthy publishing process, these timeframes differ significantly from the writing of my own memoir.

In terms of future research arising from this doctorate, scholarly analysis could be conducted into the striking discrepancy between publication of a single military widow memoir in comparison to the significant number of 9/11 widow memoirs to investigate why military widows are not writing about their experiences as 9/11 widows did.

Furthermore, I see two main avenues for future studies evolving from this research. One direction could be to apply DST more widely to the analysis of memoir and other autobiographical texts. The benefit of using DST to read memoir is that this methodology is comprehensive, detailed and well-researched within narrative psychology and importantly is intended to understand individual experience. As such it is particularly suited to analysing autobiographical writing, especially texts that depict adversarial life experiences, such as illness and disability memoirs.

The second direction for future research could be the analysis of different types of bereavement. As this doctorate focused on one type of loss – premature spousal bereavement – narrated in English, it would be useful to research narrative identity construction following other types of profound loss, such as losing one's child and multiple losses, and a cross-cultural comparison by studying other grief memoirs published worldwide and in other languages.

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